

THE OUTDOOR CHUMS IN THE FOREST



By
CAPTAIN
QUINCY
ALLEN

JAN 39 1922

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"WOW! LOOK AT THE BUNCH, WILL YOU?"—*Frontispiece.*

The Outdoor Chums in the Forest.

—Page 156.

THE OUTDOOR CHUMS IN THE FOREST

OR

Laying the Ghost of Oak Ridge

BY

CAPTAIN QUINCY ALLEN

AUTHOR OF "THE OUTDOOR CHUMS," "THE OUTDOOR CHUMS ON THE
LAKE," "THE OUTDOOR CHUMS AFTER BIG GAME," ETC.

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THE OUTDOOR CHUMS SERIES

BY CAPTAIN QUINCY ALLEN

THE OUTDOOR CHUMS

Or The First Tour of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club

THE OUTDOOR CHUMS ON THE LAKE

Or Lively Adventures on Wildcat Island

THE OUTDOOR CHUMS IN THE FOREST

Or Laying the Ghost of Oak Ridge

THE OUTDOOR CHUMS ON THE GULF

Or Rescuing the Lost Balloonists

THE OUTDOOR CHUMS AFTER BIG GAME

Or Perilous Adventures in the Wilderness

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The Outdoor Chums in the Forest

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THE OUTDOOR CHUMS IN THE FOREST

CHAPTER I

A QUESTION OF NERVE

"THAT'S a likely yarn, Sandy. I tell you I don't believe in ghosts."

"All right. You can say what you like, Bluff Masters, but Caleb declares he saw it."

"Oh, shucks! He must have been dreaming."

"Guess you never had any experience with that sort of things."

"Only once, and that time it turned out to be a crazy man. Since then I've got my opinion of any fellow who takes stock in ghost stories."

"Think you're mighty brave just because you've got that old gun of yours along—been having it at the locksmith's again, I reckon. Seems like it's there half the time, getting some tinkering done. I dare you to go out to Oak

Ridge and settle this ghost question once for all. There you are, and it's either take me up, or back down off that high horse."

"Vacation's set in, and my chums don't seem to know just where to go. Tell you what, I've got a good notion to put it up to the crowd right away."

"Talk is cheap, Bluff. I'll believe it when I hear of you fellows going. So long," and the speaker, a boy who attended the same school in Centerville that Bluff did, walked down the main street of the little town that lay on Lake Camalot.

Bluff looked after him for a minute, as though he might be turning the daring project over in his mind. Then he fondled the repeating shotgun he was carrying, as if he resented the slur the other had cast upon its good qualities.

"Say, now, perhaps that would be a dandy idea, all right. Some people take considerable stock in that blooming old ghost story, and I reckon it would make a lot of silly ones sleep sounder if we went out and learned that the thing was only a fake after all. Wonder what the rest of the boys would say if I proposed it. And Will, he'd declare he wanted to take a snapshot of the ghost with his camera."

The idea seemed to amuse the boy, for he

laughed softly to himself as he once more shouldered his gun, took a new grip on the package of ammunition he was carrying home, and again started along the main street of the town.

It was a July morning. School was out, the Glorious Fourth was but a memory, and the boys were trying to make suitable plans for spending their vacation in various little outings of a character to suit their love for the open.

There were an unusual number of people on the street that morning, Bluff noticed. A circus was in town, and they had promised a street parade at some time before noon, so that the boys and girls haunted the main thoroughfare in large and constantly increasing numbers.

Now Bluff liked to see such an exhibition just as well as the next one, but he believed he had plenty of time to get home with his gun and come back again.

A little further on he came face to face with a rough-looking fellow about his own age, whose freckled countenance took on a sneer at sight of the gun which Bluff carried.

"See yuh been repairin' the little old shootin'-iron again, Bluff. Think yuh happen tuh be some punkins because once yuh held up some of my crowd with that stick when we happened to be empty-handed. Sho! yuh can be brave enough

when it's all one-sided, but turn the tables around an' I bet you'd run faster than we did over on Wildcat Island," said this worthy, as he stopped in front of the other.

Bluff belonged to a club of four boys who had formed plans to spend their vacations in the open whenever possible. They called it the Rod, Gun and Camera Club, and when a convenient storm tore off the roof from half the Academy, the previous October, necessitating a short session of holidays, they had gone up into the woods to camp, as told in the first volume of this series, entitled "The Outdoor Chums; or, First Tour of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club."

Here they were constantly annoyed by a crowd of town idlers, under the leadership of one Andy Lasher, and the four chums passed through a series of the most entertaining adventures, such as pleases all boys who love excitement. These three comrades of Bluff were named Frank Langdon, Jerry Wallington and Will Milton, the latter being a camera crank of the first water, always ready to sacrifice his comfort and time if there was any hope of securing a picture to commemorate the event.

During their outing, Jerry, being lost in the woods during a storm, succeeded in saving the life of Andy, who after that refused to continue

his mean tactics of plaguing the chums, so that the leadership of the opposition fell upon another fellow, the same Pet Peters who was now jeering Bluff.

When the Easter week of holidays came, in early April, the chums had decided to spend a portion of the time camping on a timber-covered island near the foot of the ten-mile lake, and which was seldom visited by any one on account of the stories told about the vast number of wildcats to be found there, as well as the wild man who had been seen at various times. A fire on the little steamboat plying the lake, and the robbery of a passenger, played an important part in the exciting events that occurred while the chums were at Wildcat Island, all of which, including the solving of the mystery connected with the wild man, have been set down in the second volume of this series, called "The Outdoor Chums on the Lake; or, Lively Adventures on Wildcat Island."

As can be seen from what Bluff said, the boys were a bit uncertain as to where they should go during the early part of vacation time. Later on they expected to separate, as Will was to accompany his widowed mother to the seashore, and two of the others also had plans after the same kind; but for a couple of weeks they wanted

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some little, delightful camping experience, not too far away.

Bluff secretly had a contempt for Pet Peters. Still, he knew the other was an antagonist not to be lightly esteemed, and that once he set his mind on a thing he could hardly be called off. The trouble was, as a rule, his object proved to be a vindictive one, rather than worthy of praise.

"Oh, I don't pretend to be a hero," said Bluff, as he gave the other boy look for look, "and I'll put you wise to that right here. But when it comes to a pinch, and some mighty mean fellows are trying to play tricks on me and my chums, I can hold my own, all right. This gun may be unlucky about getting out of order too often, but she can scatter the shot, and is all to the good. You want to fight shy of her, Pet, that's all."

"Say, they named yuh all right when they called yuh Bluff. Sometimes these yer windbags they get punctured like. Take care that don't happen to you. I reckon the parade must be comin', ter judge from all the racket along yonder. Better fall in front and let the people of Centerville see the great hero, hey?"

Bluff had turned his head to look. If what the other said were true, then he would have no time to go home and leave his gun.

There did seem to be considerable excitement just at the bend in the street, and it was growing greater with the passage of every second. Men were running, shouting, and making for the sidewalks. Some caught up small children in their arms. Every one appeared tremendously stirred, as though an event far out of the common were about to occur.

Bluff laughed.

"Seems like people get crazier every year over the old circus. I understand this is a bum one, anyway. Look at 'em scoot! They couldn't act more like a lot of loons if the elephant had broken loose and was on the warpath. I don't hear the band playing, do you, Pet?" he said.

"No, I don't. And I reckon there's something gone wrong around that bend in the street. Them fellers wouldn't act that way, else. See that fat woman tumble over, will yuh! Now she rolls like a barrel to the pavement. She's nigh about scairt to death, I tell yuh! What kin it be?" exclaimed Pet.

By this time Bluff was aroused. He realized that all this tremendous excitement could not have been caused by the near approach of the circus parade. There was the sedate head of the Academy footing it for the shelter of a shoeshop as if he had entered for a hundred-yard dash.

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Heads were appearing at all the windows, and now shrieks began to be added to the clamor.

Bluff wondered if he were dreaming. Had all Centerville gone crazy? There was an asylum over at Merrick, but since when had its inmates broken loose and taken up quarters in Centerville?

If he had not been gripping his gun and that package of shells, Bluff might have rubbed his eyes to find out if he were really and truly awake.

"Run! run!"

It sounded as though a dozen people were shouting that word. Why should they want to get others to run? Had the lion broken out of his cage, and was he coming down the street, looking for victims?

Some boys were climbing trees with mad haste. Perhaps they did not as yet fully understand the need of such a retreat, but in time of danger it seems natural for the ordinary boy to find refuge in a tree, as though he were, in truth, descended from monkey ancestors.

Now for the first time they caught other words that were being shouted by the panic-stricken people along the street, as they rushed hither and thither, anxious to find shelter somewhere.

"Mad dog! Mad dog!"

Pet Peters gave a howl of fear. He was

greatly afraid of all dogs, and the very idea of a mad cur caused him to turn white and show his craven blood.

He made a wild rush for the nearest tree, and clambered into the lower branches with a speed that would have won a medal in a race.

Bluff wanted to follow after him. He felt his nerves quivering with fright, and as he started to run his knees showed an inclination to knock together.

There was the choirmaster, Mr. Melod, chasing across the street, and heading for the milliner's establishment opposite. He was usually a very dignified man, but just then, with his hat fallen off, and fear written upon his face, he startled Bluff not a little.

"Run, Richard! Come this way, my boy!" he called, beckoning wildly; for Bluff had come to a sudden pause in the middle of the road as a sudden terrible thought flashed into his mind.

He had a gun in his hands, and ammunition in plenty. Pet Peters had just called him next door to a coward, who could only show valor when everything was on his side. Who was to stop this mad dog in his career? There were many little children around the next bend, awaiting the coming of the circus parade. What if

some of them were bitten by the beast, and he with a gun in his hands?

Bluff turned as white as a ghost. His hands were shaking furiously as he broke open the package he carried. The shells fell in a heap to the road, and eagerly the boy stooped down to pick up one and push it into the magazine of the gun. Then he took up a second and a third.

There was no time for more. He would not need them. If he could not finish the mad beast with three shots it was bound to be all over with him. What that boy suffered as he crouched there, staring at the terrible brute that came around the curve in the street, no one would ever know.

He heard a clamor of voices. Some applauded his act, while others, frightened lest he fall a prey to the fury of the mad dog, cried to him to run while there was yet time. Even Pet Peters, perched securely on a limb of the tree, nearly above Bluff, shouted to him to get behind the trunk of the same.

Bluff heard this confusion as in a dream. He only saw that advancing beast, and to his eyes the yellow hound looked almost as big as a lion just then. Indeed, the brute did present a terrible aspect, with bloodshot eyes, and foam dripping from his square jaws.

Bluff could hardly raise the gun to his shoulder, in order to glance along the single barrel, but strange to say, just then it seemed as though a miracle had been wrought, for his nerves became like steel, and the gun no longer wavered.

CHAPTER II

LAYING PLANS

LIKE magic, it seemed, all that clamor died away.

Men and women simply stared at the terrible spectacle of that boy crouched there in the street, and that huge dog advancing directly toward him, with eager mien. Doubtless many a prayer was offered up for the safety of the lad who had thrown himself into the breach between that brute and the innocent children who thronged the square just beyond.

"Hey, Bluff! Aim right atween his bloomin' old eyes!" called Pet from his perch.

"Shoot!" shouted one man, almost wild because the dog was now so very near the kneeling boy, whom he imagined must be petrified with fear.

But Bluff was waiting. He wanted to make sure. The shot in his gun was small, and intended for birds. To render it effective against

such a beast it must go at close quarters, when it would have all the force of a bullet.

Along that glistening barrel he could see the flaming eyes of the vicious dog, now not more than twenty feet away. Then he pulled the trigger!

Just as though he were shooting ducks in the slough at the foot of the lake, Bluff instantly made a movement with his hands that Jerry always likened to the action of a pump handle. Thank goodness! The locksmith had done his job well, for the mechanism of the gun worked like a charm, sending the empty shell flying, and pushing a full one into place.

He again aimed his weapon. The dog was on the ground, kicking, but even as Bluff looked he struggled up again. This was the signal for a second shot, and after that there was one last movement and the hideous creature lay there, still.

Then broke out a wild shout that was taken up along the whole street. People came thronging out of the houses to rush forward and gaze upon the monster that had sent them into such a panic of fear. A few thought to wring the hand of Bluff and thank him for what he had done.

The boy was no longer white. He had turned

furiously red under these praises, and hardly knew what to do or say, it was so embarrassing. Mr. Melod, the choirmaster, wrung his hand, while tears came into his eyes.

"My dear boy, I am proud of you this day. That was a noble deed of yours, and deserves to be handed down in the annals of Centerville, as an incentive to the coming generations," he said with deep feeling.

"Oh, shucks! That wasn't so very much, sir. Any fellow with a gun would have done it. What would they have thought of me running away, and with this thing in my hands? I'm only ashamed to say I was about as badly scared as Pet here. He didn't have a gun, so he climbed a tree," stammered the boy, trying to break loose from the encircling arms of Miss Samantha Green, the old-maid milliner, who had witnessed the entire performance from the window of her shop, and was inclined to be sentimental at all times.

"Yes, I had a big stone up there with me, fellers, an' I was a-goin' tuh crack the pup on the head with it w'en he kim under the tree; but Bluff he got first say, as he allers does. It ain't fair, I tell yuh. I'd a-give the dorg a plunk that would a made him croak," declared Pet, shaking his head ferociously.

"Listen to him, will you, boys!" exclaimed Jerry Wallington, as with a quick movement he snatched from the hand of the other the rock which he had intended should demolish the big brute, and held it up. "This pebble is what Pet meant to throw at that yellow beast. Like as not it would have hurt him as much as a peashooter might. Talk to me about that for bravery, will you? Only for my chum, somebody might have been hurt. He's all to the good!"

Bluff had been watching his chance, and as soon as the excited old maid freed her arms he darted away, followed by two other boys. These were Jerry, and Will Milton, the latter of whom was smiling all over his face.

"That was the time luck followed me, fellows. The photographer just loaded my camera for me when I was buying a new lot of films, and if I didn't snap off five of the dandiest pictures of that little circus you ever saw. Wait till I get a chance to develop them, and see," he was rattling along.

"There comes Frank, too! Stop and wait for him, boys," said Jerry just then.

A fourth lad quickly joined the group. He was a fine-looking boy, with a face full of determination and quiet courage. His first act was

to seize the hand of the still blushing Bluff and squeeze it fiercely.

"Great work, old man! The best ever! Lucky chap that you were to have that gun of yours along. I happened to be in the drugstore, and the people came pushing in so fast that it was impossible to get out. So I glued my nose to a window, and saw it all. My heart was in my throat; but I knew you wouldn't fail, though to tell the honest truth, I wasn't half so certain about the gun."

"Then it's up to you to apologize to the bully old gun right away," said Bluff. "Didn't she act great? Why, it was as easy as falling off a log. Anybody could have done it. And don't you believe there was any hero business about it, either. I was that badly scared my hands shook as if I had fever and ague, like poor old Dad Atkins. Just pure luck carried me through, fellows."

"Don't you believe it for a minute," declared Will vehemently, at this juncture, "and when my pictures are developed I can prove it. I was only fifty feet away, hardly that, and I give you my word that when the cur was almost on top of Bluff all his shake left him. He aimed that gun as if he was shooting at a set target."

"And to hear that big blower, Pet Peters,

say he was ready to smash the brute's cranium in with a rock, when he was gripping a pebble not half as large as my hand! That is a joke to make me laugh," went on Jerry.

"What's that?" demanded Frank, who had not been present when the boast was made.

"Pet was jealous. He says Bluff always cuts him out from hanging on to the glory part. He was telling about snatching up a big rock, meaning to let it drop on the head of the mad dog as he went under the limb of the tree, when Jerry pulled it out of his hand. Here it is—I picked it up for a memento."

Will held up a small stone as he spoke, at which Frank burst into a laugh.

"I suppose at the time Pet really thought he was picking up a boulder. What do you suppose that hard-headed brute would have thought if this pebble had struck him? It would have been a flea bite. But for one, I'm done laughing at that newfangled gun of yours, Bluff."

"Me, too. I've said some mighty mean things about it in the past, pard, but never again. Talk to me about a handy thing to have about the house, that same gun just seems to wallow in luck. It's Johnny-on-the-spot when most needed. I may still believe in my double-barrel as the best

thing on earth, but this contraption has its uses, and many of 'em."

Which was saying pretty much for Jerry.

"But I saw you talking to Pet before all that row broke out," remarked Will.

"Yes; he stopped me to jeer at the gun, like a good many other fellows, who don't know a good thing when they see it," answered Bluff, grinning amiably.

"Well, perhaps he's also changed his mind about it, like Jerry here," laughed Frank.

"To tell the honest truth, boys, perhaps it was something Pet said that made me determine it was my duty to stand there and knock that beast over," admitted Bluff, as if determined to confess all his shortcomings while about it.

"And what was that?" asked Jerry, frowning, for he detested Pet above all other boys in town.

"He was saying that it didn't take much courage to hold up fellows when one had a gun and they didn't; he also took occasion to rub it in, and declare that I was by nature a timid sort of a chap, well named Bluff. Do you know, what he said came to me like a flash, even while my legs were bent on carrying me across the street to a store or a tree. That was why I stopped so suddenly. I was ashamed to run while I held

this gun. So you see there was no bravery about it, only desperation."

"Humbug! That's what most so-called bravery is, old fellow," said Frank, patting him on the back.

"I saw you talking to Sandy Griggs, too," remarked Will.

"Say, that reminds me! I've got a plan to propose for a short outing. We were fortunate enough to discover the secret of the wild man of the island, last spring—what's to hinder us from going out to Oak Ridge and doing a little investigating there, eh?" demanded Bluff eagerly.

The others looked at him curiously.

"Oak Ridge—that's out in the Sunset Mountains," remarked Will dubiously.

"Seems to me I've heard considerable of that place lately. Isn't there some sort of a ghost story going the rounds about it?" asked Frank, smiling.

"Tell me about that, will you?" burst out Jerry, bristling up. "Bluff isn't content with the laurels he's already won, but sighs for more. First it was the wild man we rounded up, and now he hankers after laying a real genuine ghost by the heels. Count me in, if you decide to go. I'm always eager to have a share in all kinds of excitement, you know."

"Sandy says Caleb, the canal lockkeeper, saw the ghost really and truly. Caleb isn't a drinking man, either, so he must have seen something or other. What do you say, boys? Would it be fun, or not, to camp out in that range of hills and run down this story of a ghost?" demanded Bluff.

"Those in favor, raise a hand," said Frank.

Instantly four hands went up.

"That settles it, then," declared the leader of the four chums. "We will go to-morrow to camp along Oak Ridge, and discover, if we can, the truth about this talked-of ghost."

CHAPTER III

THE CAMP BY THE WAYSIDE

"GET up, there, you Peter!"

"Give the old sleepy-head another cut with the whip, Jerry."

"No use. He only flips his stub of a tail around, and shakes his head. I tell you nothing short of a burr under his tail would make old Peter run, fellows."

"And at this time of year there are no burrs. Oh, well, we're in no hurry. What if we do have to make a half-way camp? It is a part of the fun, boys," and Frank lay back on the cargo in the wagon, and laughed to see the ears of the patient horse wag back and forth as he toiled stolidly along the rough road.

They had decided not to use their motorcycles on this trip, for several reasons. In the first place, two of them were in need of a good overhauling, and of the remaining couple, that belonging to Frank was the only one always kept

in trim. Besides, neither Adolphus, the colored man working for Mr. Wallington, nor his team, were available for use, and so they had to hire a rig that was proving very disappointing to all but Will, who took several fetching views of the picturesque beast.

Sometimes the boys walked, but when they grew tired they climbed up on the load, and Peter only wheezed a bit more, as though in protest.

The afternoon was well along by now. They had started just after noon, and had been foolish enough to believe they might reach the foothills of the Sunset Mountains by dark.

"Half way there, boys, and I move we look for a decent place to camp," suggested Bluff after another hour had lagged along.

"I'm getting a little bit hungry myself," admitted Frank, as his hand caressed the chest that contained a dozen tin cans with screw-top lids, and used for holding all such positive necessities as tea, coffee, sugar, rice, self-raising flour, beans, and other things. It was Frank's special property, and had been with him on many a trip up in the wilds of Maine.

"And there's a spot I rather fancy!" exclaimed Jerry, pointing ahead.

Presently the caravan had come to a stop.

Poor, tired old Peter was taken out of the shafts and attended to by Jerry, who could not bear to let any dumb beast go hungry. Meanwhile, the others hustled about, got the tents up, and made a fireplace with a couple of big logs, that would answer for the one night.

"This looks good to me, fellows," declared Jerry as he turned from his task and surveyed the scene, with pleasure written big on his face.

"I'm never so happy as when putting up the tents, and never so miserable as in striking camp. There's a charm about it that a fellow can feel, but never put into words," said Frank, pausing from his labor.

"No danger of a storm to-night, I guess, but I always make it a practice to provide a runaway for water, in case of a heavy rain. Once I was flooded out by neglecting that thing, and I don't want it to happen again," he continued, as Jerry bent down to see what he was digging with the camp hatchet he carried.

"Look at that sunset, will you!" exclaimed Will, always on the watch for anything bordering on the picturesque. "What wouldn't I give to get those colors as they are there! The color screen gives me the clouds, all right, but a fortune awaits the man who can fix such a glorious thing as that!"

"Yes; and just to think what will become of all the poor artists then. They'll be knocked out of business flatter than a pancake," declared Jerry, who always kept his eye on the practical side of things.

"That reminds me of a promise I made Bluff yesterday," laughed Frank.

"Oh, yes!—that the first night in camp you'd give us some of those bully old Maine flapjacks you know how to toss up in the air so well. Boys, don't you let him crawl, now. I insist on him keeping his word!" cried Bluff eagerly.

"So say we all of us! Tiger! Here's a piece of paper, and while you get the rest of the things unpacked I'll just amuse myself laying out a bill of fare for this fine feast we expect to have. That ham there is a home-smoked one. Dad bought half a dozen from old Farmer Corntassel, and if ever you taste his hams your mouth'll water at the chance of getting a slice of that to-night."

So saying, Jerry squatted down on a log and commenced to screw his forehead up in innumerable wrinkles as he tried to conjure up his menu.

The others were working right along, and when it came time to do the cooking Frank assumed charge.

"Ain't this great, fellows?" demanded Jerry, as the three sat there devouring the flapjacks as fast as Frank could pile them up.

"And I'm glad I thought of this honey. Butter is good with pancakes, but as for me, I like something sweet besides—maple syrup or honey," announced Bluff.

"I agree with you in all but one thing, Bluff," said Jerry.

"What might that be?" asked the other, reaching over for his sixth helping.

"Never, so long as you live, say 'pancakes' when in camp. It may go at home, but under the free sky, with the tents near by, and the glowing fire lighting up the scene, it is considered next door to a crime to call them anything but flapjacks. Get that, son?"

"I'll try to remember; but it's hard to overcome the teachings of infancy, you know. I admit that you know more in a day than I do in a week about woodcraft, but I'll never own up that you are physically sounder than I am. I won out as many times blowing up those beastly old rubber mattresses as you did," declared Bluff.

Frank and Will exchanged quick looks, and both tried to hide a smile.

On their former trip, Frank had fetched along a couple of wide rubber mattresses that could

be made into comfortable beds after they had been filled with air. The job of so inflating them had seemed a rather formidable one to tackle, each and every night, and so, profiting by a trick he had seen done elsewhere, he tried a little strategy in order to lighten the burden.

Jerry and Bluff were jealous of each other's make-up. They constantly boasted as to their superior accomplishments, and so Frank easily caused them to enter into a competition to see which one could prove a winner in blowing up the twin rubber mattresses.

The first night it was called a tie. Those eager fellows could hardly wait for the next occasion to come in order to again engage in rivalry. On the second attempt Jerry was the winner, but by so narrow a margin that he could not refuse Bluff's dare to have another try on the next night. Bluff won this time.

And there was never any trouble about getting the beds made up as long as the four chums camped on Wildcat Island.

The joke had never been told to them, so that even to this day they rested in utter ignorance as to what dupes they had been in the hands of their two chums. Frank and Will foresaw other occasions when they would be only too glad

to have these eager rivals do the "wind act" with eagerness while they sat by and timed the job.

The supper was pronounced a great success by all, even the cook having a good word to say for Bluff's coffee.

"Any use of posting a sentry to-night?" asked Jerry, as they lay around, and a few yawns attested to the fact that they were getting sleepy.

"Well, not unless you think that ghost may be wandering far away from his usual stamping-grounds. I shouldn't think we could look for any other trouble out here, so far from the railroad and town," declared Frank.

"All the same, I think we ought to have some sort of system. It's generally understood that we intended coming out here, and how do we know but what that Pet Peters and his crowd may be mean enough to sneak up on us and stone our camp? They did it before, you remember, fellows," protested Bluff.

"I hope you don't think of cracking away at human beings the way you did at that big yellow dog, Bluff. Please don't get the habit; it's hard to break."

"Kindly refrain, Frank; or, as Pet would say, 'Aw, come off your perch!' I'm always willing to give any one of those fellows a good scare at any time, but you know I wouldn't want to.

hurt even Pet himself, unless he forced me," returned Bluff, quickly dropping the gun he had been fondling so affectionately.

"Well, if you fellows are so bent on trying to prove to Will and I which one has the biggest lungs, I suppose we'll have to surrender our right to have a turn at those rubber bags, and let you try again. Help me lay them out, Will, and don't look so envious. When they get tired of this thing we can have a chance."

"Don't worry about that, Frank. I shall never get tired of beating Bluff at that good old game. Just watch me run away from him."

But Jerry, to his surprise, was declared to fall just short of being a winner, and he had to listen to the taunts of his rival, and determine that on the next night he would be in better trim.

The fire was fixed to hold out several hours. Bluff, despite his declaration that he meant to keep awake, and watch, crawled into one of the tents and snuggled down under a blanket, since the night air was cool, even for July.

So the silence of slumber presently fell upon the camp by the wayside.

It must have been about midnight when Frank was awakened by a tremendous neighing on the part of old Peter, the horse, fastened to a tree near by.

Thinking the beast might have become caught in the rope, and need attention, Frank crawled out of the tent. The fire was low, and darkness hovered over the camp.

Just as he appeared, to his astonishment he saw the kettles and coffee-pot, as well as every frying-pan in camp, begin to creep along the ground in a long line, and then ascend toward the branches of the tree, in jangling unison.

CHAPTER IV

THINGS BEGIN TO HAPPEN

"TALK to me about that!" exclaimed Jerry, as he thrust his head out from the tent.

"What's it all mean?" demanded Will, still half asleep, while crawling forth.

"I knew it would come! What did I say, fellows? They're at their old tricks, all right!" cried Bluff. "Where's my gun?"

Frank understood, after that one moment of utter astonishment. He realized that it was a trick on the part of some one who must have crept into their camp while they slept. This unknown had fastened all the camp cooking outfit to a rope, and this in turn had been thrown over a limb of a tree, the other end being grasped by the jokers.

A series of pulls had carried that string of pans and kettles up into the air, where they jangled against each other as the cord was violently drawn up and then lowered suddenly.

Frank sprang forward. He could give a shrewd guess as to where the parties lay who took such delight in pestering himself and chums, and he was just then in a frame of mind to visit severe punishment if he could only lay his indignant hands upon them.

He had not taken three steps when he measured his length upon the ground, while a chorus of heavy laughs announced that this was a part of the program on the part of those who had actually followed all the way from town on purpose to annoy them.

Another rope had been stretched across in front of the tents, with the idea of tripping any one, should they rush out in hot haste.

It was all in the game, and Frank, while he barked his nose and bruised his elbows and knees, knew full well he should have exercised a little more caution.

He sprang to his feet full of vim.

There was a dreadful crash behind that gave him a shock, until he realized that it must come from the cooking utensils being dropped in a heap as those who had held the other end of the cord let go in order to seek safety in flight.

Bluff by this time had appeared in view, hugging his pet repeater in his arms.

He banged away with a vim, and several shots

made the echoes ring through the adjacent woods.

"They're gone," announced Frank, limping back to the vicinity of the fire.

"Did they hurt you?" demanded Bluff indignantly, as he saw Frank rubbing his barked shins.

"Well, not so that you could notice; but I fell over that rope you saw Jerry go down across, and which those rascals stretched here for that purpose. Nothing serious, beyond a few scratches," returned the other, forcing a smile.

"I wonder if they mean to follow us all the way and keep up this racket?" said Bluff. "Are we ever going to camp out without that crowd pestering us like a flock of hornets?"

"Wow! Talk to me about that, will you? A flock of hornets is good—for you, Bluff. I've got a few bumps myself, tumbling over that beastly rope. And what a ghastly trick, to tie up all our cooking things that way! The fellow who originated that joke ought to be put in the funny house over at Merrick," said Jerry.

"I hope they haven't dented all your nice aluminum ware, Frank," remarked Will.

"That would be a shame, and I value it so. But investigation doesn't seem to prove any serious damage, for which I'm glad."

"Hey, Frank, if you're getting out the arnica

bottle, just remember that there are two of us in the same boat, will you?" sang out Jerry, also rubbing his legs.

"What did I say, fellows, about keeping guard? I tell you it's the only safe way when such a determined scamp as that Pet Peters is around. And after this I think we ought to make a regular practice of taking turns. I'm willing to sit up my share," went on Bluff.

"Did you try to tickle them with your shot?" demanded Jerry.

"No; only meant to give them a little scare, and let 'em know we carried guns with us this time."

"I feel just cross enough to wish you could have punctured them a little—not enough to hurt much, you understand, for I'm not a savage; but they need a lesson, and that might have done the business," Jerry continued.

The camp soon quieted down, and there was no further alarm.

When morning came they found that no particular damage had resulted from the trick played by the town crowd that usually tagged after Pet Peters.

"I didn't hear Pet's sweet, melodious voice last night, come to think of it," remarked Frank,

as they ate their breakfast and discussed the exciting events of the first night out.

"Nor I. Perhaps he was smart enough to keep silent and let the rest do the shouting. Anyhow, we're in about thirty feet of pretty good line," laughed Jerry.

"They took the one we had on old Peter, to keep him from straying, and made that tripper out of it. As you say, Jerry, this other is strange in our camp, and they must have fetched it along. It may come in handy; who knows?" said philosophical Frank, always ready to get the best there was out of troubles.

"And now it looks like we might have these 'varmints,' as old Jesse Wilcox, the trapper, calls them, on our hands, as well as the wonderful ghost mystery to solve."

"The more, the merrier, Will. Give me excitement all the time when out in the forest. It's quiet enough at home, and in school. Me for the merry life, and plenty of thrills," sang Bluff.

After getting old Peter harnessed up they resumed the interrupted journey. When noon came they were within a couple of miles of the place for which they were headed, and it was determined not to make a halt, but keep on until their goal had been gained.

The Sunset Mountains proved to be of con-

siderable dimensions when one approached close to the foothills known as Oak Ridge, on account of the forest that covered the slopes. The scenery was quite wild, and all of the boys decided that they had missed it in not coming here on one of their former outings.

They allowed Frank to select a camping spot. His knowledge of such things was of great value to the chums while afloat in the wilderness. Experience is ten times better than all the book learning one can muster.

As the day was pretty well spent by the time things had been arranged to suit the particular head of the expedition, none of the boys felt like wandering far from the cozy fireside that afternoon.

"To-morrow we can take up the game in earnest, fellows. I went to see Caleb, at the lock, and he told me about his adventure. Wait till I get a chance, and I'll only too gladly let you hear it. But be ready to tie down your caps, for as sure as you live it's bound to make your hair try to stand on end like the quills on the back of a fretful porcupine," observed Jerry while they were busily engaged in the first preparations for supper.

"Wow! That tickles me!" announced Bluff. "After our experiences over on old Wildcat

Island, I seem to just hanker after thrills. I wonder——” And instead of finishing his story he cast a loving glance toward his gun, which happened to be leaning up against an adjacent tree at the time, and within arm’s length of the proud owner.

“There you go again, you bloodthirsty savage, wondering if this poor, inoffensive ghost, which hasn’t hurt anybody, that I’ve heard, could stand up before that Gatling gun of yours. Be careful, my boy. This may be another Prince Bismarck, who believes that his mission in life is to play Hamlet’s ghost scene. You might be sorry if you fired first, and investigated afterward.”

Will’s remark was caused by the fact that while in camp above the lake, in the preceding fall, they had come in contact with an eccentric character who had escaped from the asylum at Merrick, and who persisted in believing himself to be the one great Bismarck, carrying out the part with wonderful fidelity.

The supper progressed fairly well under the joint care of Bluff and Jerry, who had insisted upon showing what they had learned since the time the four chums sat around a glowing camp-fire on their previous outing.

Will was busily engaged tinkering with his camera, and dreaming of the new pictures he

hoped to get on this trip, to add to the album containing the records of the club's outings.

Frank lounged in a comfortable place, idly watching the busy workers at the fire, and smiling at several things they did which long experience told him would have to be rectified ere they could hope to call themselves veterans in the art of getting up a camp dinner that a Maine guide might envy.

The heat of the fire was not unpleasant just then, for, as has been said before, the weather was singularly cool for early July. Frank felt a trifle drowsy. He allowed his eyes to droop several times, only to open them again as one of the cooks dropped enough of his pride to sing out and ask how a certain thing should be done.

Once, however, Frank found his eyes wide open, and without a query from either Jerry or Bluff, who had their heads together, tasting something they were concocting, and with which they meant to surprise their comrades.

Frank had chanced to be looking at the bark of a tree as he sat there, when, to his surprise, something began to project from the same. Even as he stared, a stick that was thrust out speared the loaf of bread that chanced to lie close by, and after it was raised from the ground it began to quickly vanish around the tree!

CHAPTER V

JED, THE RUNAWAY BOUND BOY

"SAY, fellows, there goes your bread! I bet the ghost has got away with it!" sang out Will, at that juncture, proving that he had also seen the disappearing act.

Frank was already on his feet, filled with indignation. Once before had he known a supper to vanish mysteriously, when a couple of hoboes let down a rope over a little bluff, and by dextrously working a hook at the end of the same, caught up a kettle of stew, which was thereupon drawn up to satisfy their appetites.

"Hold him, Frank, ghost or no ghost. I'm with you!" bellowed Jerry, as he started after the other, while Bluff made a dive for his gun, that being the one thing ever uppermost in his mind when trouble came.

Frank appeared in view, and not alone.

He carried the loaf of bread under his arm, but his other hand was twisted in the shirt col-

lar of a small boy, writhing and twisting in his grasp.

"Say, he's got him!" shrieked Will in delight. "Oh! if you would only let me get my camera out and snap you off that way, Frank!"

"Talk to me about quick action!" sang out Jerry. "That pard of mine has them all beat to a frazzle. Lightning isn't in it with him, fellows."

Frank came forward with his unwilling captive. It was noticed that he made no attempt toward hurting the boy, save that he held him in a grip that nothing could break.

"How's this?" exclaimed Jerry, looking again. "Don't appear to be any of that measly crowd Pet Peters trains with. Can this be the terrible ghost of Oak Ridge?"

Bluff burst out into a roar.

"Say, I know that shaver, all right! It's Jed Prouty!" he declared.

"And who might he be when at home?" asked Frank, still holding onto his prize.

"Know old Farmer Dobson, Jerry? Well, this is his bound boy. I saw him working when I went out to carry a message from dad, and I felt sorry for any chap who had to knuckle down under that old skinflint and tyrant. Say, I bet you he's run away!"

"And he must have been awful hungry, in the bargain, for he was tearing at our loaf of bread when I caught up with him," said Frank, causing the other to be seated, after which he removed his clutch.

The boy had a small, weazened face. He looked frightened as he crouched there, his eyes turning from one of his captors to another. There was also something of pleading in his gaze that touched Bluff.

"Look here, Jed, we ain't going to hurt you. Why didn't you come straight into camp and tell us, if you were hungry? Think we would give you over to the tender mercies of that red-faced farmer, eh? That ain't our way. Supper's just ready, and we invite you to stay and share it, eh, fellows?" he said heartily.

"Them's my sentiments," declared Jerry, with more emphasis than grammar.

"Of course he's quite welcome. After he's had enough to eat he can tell us his story, and we'll try and advise him whether to go back home or stay away," said Frank kindly.

"Ain't got no home. Wouldn't run away if I did. Looky here what he done to me," and eagerly the little fellow threw himself out of the ragged cotton shirt he was wearing.

"Wow! That's fierce!" cried Jerry as he saw

the red welts on the bare back of the fugitive bound boy.

"It's an outrage, and the big brute should be made to answer for it in a law court. No matter if this boy is bound out to him, the law will protect him. You know that, Jerry. Your father is a lawyer, too," observed Frank, quite as filled with horror as his chum, though not as demonstrative.

"And I'm going to put it up to him. Dad will stand back of this poor chap, and see he has his rights. He must be taken away from old Dobson and put in the care of a decent farmer, who will treat him white," continued Jerry, waxing enthusiastic over the situation.

The boy sprang over to him, and his whole expression was one of gratitude.

"Thank you! Oh! thank you! That is all I want. I mean to do the right thing, but I'm only a poor, weak boy, and he wants me to do a man's work. I don't get enough to eat to make me strong. Oh! I've been wishing I could die, but now, somehow, I feel different. If you could only take me away from him. He beats me, and I'm awful sore!" he exclaimed.

"That's all right, Jed. Don't worry any more about it. We're going to stand back of you after this," said Jerry soothingly.

"But he's somewhere up here, looking for me. I saw him only to-day, and his big foreman, too. They carried blacksnake whips, the kind that cuts so bad. They will come here and take me away, and laugh at you, no matter what you say. Give me something to eat, and let me run away into the mountains, even if I starve to death."

Bluff laughed aloud.

"Oh, they will, eh? Well, let 'em try it. They'll find that two can play at a game like that, and that guns are much better to win with than whips," and he pointed to his beloved weapon as he spoke.

"Well, supper's ready, so sit around here, boys. Excuse me if I help our unexpected company first," observed Jerry, heaping a pannikin with some stew, and placing several slices of toast, already buttered, on top of this, after which he passed it along to the bound boy.

It was pleasure enough just to watch the look on his pinched face as he started to devour the appetizing food with the rapacity of a half-starved wolf.

"Bluff, get your gun and keep it across your knees. Sometimes kettles have a strange habit of vanishing just when you are expecting to enjoy the contents. This seems to be a bewitched country in that respect. Sticks poke out from

behind tree trunks and spear your loaf of bread right before your eyes. We don't want to have those sort of tricks played on us any more, if we can help it, you know."

"Right you are, governor," said Bluff, only too glad to be appointed guardian of the feast by Frank; and the way in which he dragged his firearm toward him was satisfactory evidence that he would be faithful to his trust.

But there was no interruption to the feast. The boy ate until he astonished his hosts by his capacity for holding food. Finally all were satisfied, and they sat around the fire to consider what should be done in the matter.

"The sight of those welts is enough for me," said Jerry, "and I'm going to make my dad promise to befriend the poor chap. He never had any use for that red-faced Cal Dobson, anyway. Once they had a lawsuit over something, and the farmer got the better of it, I'm sorry to say, so I reckon dad'll be glad of a chance to turn the tables on the old fellow and show him up."

"And I'll influence my father to see that Jed is placed in a home where they'll be kinder to him. A boy is only a slave with that big bully. I saw him once, and he was threatening a parcel of little town girls from the factory section. Perhaps they had been annoying him by stealing

fruit, or something like that, but he was talking to them like they were the worst criminals," declared Frank.

"He always swore he would be the death of me if I didn't move faster. I was so weak I just couldn't. And then I run away three days ago," said the boy.

"Say, wouldn't I like to see the old fellow just now! He must be as mad as a hornet," laughed Will.

The boy shuddered.

"Oh! I hope he won't come here till I'm gone," he said, his face taking on its old expression of abject fear.

Frank did not like to see him give way after this manner. At the same time he knew that the lad had been browbeaten all his young life, and what little spirit he may have inherited must have been about crushed.

"You must have faith in us, Jed. I give you my word that if he appeared right now we would not let him take you away," he said.

"No," declared Bluff. "He could threaten and bluster all he wanted, so long as I had my eye on him along this trusty barrel he wouldn't dare."

"Listen! I thought I heard voices!" said Will just then.

They all remained silent, to make sure. The

fugitive bound boy cowered lower in his seat. His terror-filled eyes glanced to the right and left, as though he contemplated immediate flight.

Frank put out his hand reassuringly.

"Don't you move. Trust us, Jed," he said quietly.

"But it's *him*—oh! I heard him speak! Don't I know his voice? Haven't I waked up many a time, thinking I heard it in my dreams? And nearly always he swears at me, and cuts me with that whip! Don't you think it would be better if I hid?" he asked, his confidence not quite so strong as it had been a while back.

"Don't move. I give you my word that he isn't going to take you back, and that we won't let him even put his finger on you, Jed. Do you believe me?"

The poor waif looked into the determined face of Frank. What he saw there seemed to give him a new lease of faith, for he did not make any further effort at flight.

Nearer came the gruff voices.

"Perhaps you other fellows had better get ready to repel boarders," remarked Frank, as he too, reached out and secured his shotgun.

Jerry did likewise, while Will picked up his camera and hied him away to a spot where he

thought he might secure a flashlight picture of the scene.

And hardly had the stage been set after this fashion than two rough-looking men showed up on the edge of the camp, standing there while they looked the group over.

CHAPTER VI

FARMER DOBSON CHANGES HIS MIND

"You were right, Jason; he's here," growled one voice.

"And our hunt is at an end," came in another.

The two men advanced a few paces. Frank recognized the leader as the same Farmer Dobson whom he had once seen scolding a group of little girls in a most bearish manner. He was a big man, with a face that was almost as red as the bandana handkerchief he wore fastened about his neck.

Cal Dobson kept his glittering eyes fastened on the shrinking form of Jed, as he thus advanced closer to the fire.

"So you're here, youngster, be ye? Give us a great chase, you did, but I reckon ye understand by now that when Cal Dobson says a thing he sticks by it. My best bull broke away and took to the hills at the same time you did. Things always happen in bunches. Git up and come along home," he said in his terrible voice.

The boy looked at Frank with his heart in his eyes.

"Sit still, Jed," said that lad easily.

At this the farmer turned his eyes upon the speaker. Men had trembled at that look, and he evidently thought to convince Frank that it would be the greatest blunder of his life if he dared stand in the way of his will.

"What's that?" he exclaimed, frowning blackly.

"I told the boy to sit still," repeated Frank.

The man with the farmer gave a gasp, as though he found it difficult to believe his ears. That any one should dare disagree with Cal Dobson surprised him, and to hear a mere stripling do so made him rub his eyes in doubt.

"That boy is bound out to me for a term of years. He ran away from a good home. I hev been hunting a long time for him. Now that I've found the critter he is going back with me. The law is behind me in all that I do. Look you out how you put up a hand to interfere, boy."

"That is true, and I think the law will soon catch up with you, Mr. Dobson. You speak of a good home; this boy says that you are a tyrant, and that you beat him unmercifully," went on Frank, undaunted.

"He lies, the little pup! the ungrateful kid!"

snapped the farmer, taking a step toward the object of his anger.

"I don't believe it. He has shown us the proof. His back is marked by welts, and they could only have come from the lash of a whip."

"Whatever he got he deserved ten times over. He was obstinate, and sassy to his legal guardian. The law allows a father to punish his child; it lets a man treat a bound boy just the same as if he was his own boy. I want to make a man out of Jed. I believe in the old injunction, 'Spare the rod and spoil the child.' Now, enough of this. Air you comin' along with me, Jed?"

He took another step toward the boy. Again the latter shrank closer to Frank.

"Stop just where you are, Mr. Dobson! This is my camp. You were not invited here. We have a right to defend our property, and we intend to do it, I give you my word. Take another step forward, and you do it at your peril, sir!"

Dobson looked at the determined mien of the speaker. Then his uneasy eyes roved around, and he saw two other guns half raised in a threatening manner.

"By gum! I believe the young terrors would shoot, sir! Let's go and hunt for the runaway bull!" exclaimed his companion.

"But that is my property they are harboring here, confound it!" cried the farmer.

"Then go about reclaiming it in a legal way. Bring the sheriff, Mr. Dodd, here, and we'll allow you to take the boy away, if he is in our camp. But, Mr. Dodson, understand that he shall see the cruel welts on the back of Jed, and hear his story from his own lips. Take him now you shall not. On that my chums and myself are fully agreed. Isn't it so, boys?" went on Frank.

"That's what I say," declared Bluff positively.

"I back Frank up in all he says," came from Jerry.

Click!

"There! I've got the dandiest picture ever!" cried Will.

The farmer and his foreman had started, and uttered exclamations of alarm, as a sudden dazzling white light flashed over the scene. It was the ardent photographer, taking his flashlight of the scene for future reference.

Somehow, Mr. Dobson seemed cowed to an extent his man had never known before. Perhaps it was the sight of the several guns, backed by the looks of the four young campers; or else he had been alarmed by Frank's allusion to the welts upon the bound boy's back.

"This is an outrage that you will suffer for. The law will back me up in claiming my own. I'm not fool enough to try to take the boy under your guns; but wait, and see if you can balk Cal Dobson," he went on, morosely.

"If you're going to law about it, let me recommend my dad, John Masters," said Bluff smoothly.

At which the farmer started, and looked more uneasy than ever. He had not forgotten the little warfare that existed between himself and John Masters. Doubtless the lawyer would be only too glad of an opportunity to even up the score. More than ever must he try to get Jed back to the farm before those telltale welts on his back were seen of men.

"I'm not going to stay here to be insulted any longer. Remember, I give ye plain warning that for this high-handed outrage every one of ye will pay dear. As for you, Jed——"

He did not finish the sentence, but the ferocious look which he bent upon the bound boy was enough to freeze the blood in his veins.

Then Mr. Dobson and his man wheeled and strode away. The farmer did not look back, even when the obliging Will called out:

"Oh, Mr. Dobson! Please don't forget that you appear in that picture, and if you would like

to possess one you can have it at the cost of production."

When the unwelcome intruders had really passed out of sight Jed crept over to Frank and caught his hand.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you for being so kind. He hates me more than ever, and if he ever gets me back to his farm he will nearly kill me, I believe," he said in thrilling tones of gratitude.

"Then depend on it he never will, if we can prevent it. I don't quite understand this thing. It seems so unnatural for even a strong-tempered man like Mr. Dobson to hate a poor little chap like you so much. He acts as if he had a personal spite against you, Jed. Do you know of any reason why this should be so?"

Frank asked this because he shrewdly fancied that there must be something back of the whole thing besides mere cruelty on the farmer's part.

"Yes, I believe I do," admitted the other, slowly.

"Would you mind telling us, Jed?" continued Frank.

"No, because you are my good friends, all of you. I would trust you with anything in the world."

As the lad spoke his hand sought the bosom

of his ragged shirt. When he drew it out they could see that he was holding something which he handled with the utmost reverence.

Naturally, all of the boys crowded around, anxious to see what it was he had wrapped up in that small piece of cloth in the shape of a tiny bag, and which had been fastened with a small safety-pin inside his cotton shirt.

So Jed opened it, and took out a small locket.

"I have thought from the start that he wanted to get hold of this, though why he should I could never guess. Many times he searched my clothes. Why, the first night I was in his house he crept into my attic room after he thought I was asleep, and went through all my pockets; but I had it under my pillow. That made me afraid, and I hid it away."

"Please go on. We are all mightily interested," said Frank.

"Twice he whipped me because he said I was withholding something that belonged to him, and once he even demanded what I had done with this locket; but if he killed me I would not have told him, because you see it contains the picture of my own dear dead mother!"

He opened the locket, and they saw the face of a sweet woman, who had evidently known

what it was to suffer before she went to another world.

"Where did you get this?" asked Frank, after he had passed it around so that all his chums could see.

"She put it in my hands as she was dying. She said it might be of value to me some day, and never to let it pass out of my possession. It *is* of great value to me, but only because it holds her precious face," replied the boy, sighing, as the tears ran down his cheeks.

Frank examined the locket again, and shook his head.

"She did not tell you how it would be valuable?" he asked.

The lad managed to restrain his feelings so that he could reply.

"I have often thought she intended to do so, but had been overcome before she could speak more, and I never knew."

"But evidently, in some way, it has to do with your future, and Cal Dobson knows, or suspects, the secret, too. How did you happen to be bound out to him in the first place, Jed?" Frank went on, anxious to know more of this strange thing.

"Why, you see, he is my mother's first cousin, and he applied to have me bound out to him, as the next of kin. No one else wanted me, and so

they handed me over to him to bring to Center-ville," replied the boy readily.

"That's a point worth remembering. So he's a relative, eh? I guess nobody around here knew that before. Evidently Mr. Dobson has some scheme in view, and the possession of this same locket is concerned in it. He could get plenty of boys, but there is something else beyond that."

"Hey, Frank, talk about your lawyers, you ought to be one," declared Jerry.

"But you see I want to help Jed, if I can. He is in trouble, and we must stand by him, fellows."

"And we will. Do you think the old humbug has really gone home?" asked Will.

"Perhaps he may get out a warrant to take Jed away, and bring some officer up here to serve it," suggested Jerry.

Frank did not appear alarmed, as he continued:

"Somehow, I don't seem to believe it. Dobson looked worried when I spoke about his cruel treatment of the bound boy. He knows the law would never stand back of such a thing. Then he fears your father, Bluff. Perhaps he has more reason now, than ever, for getting his hands on the boy."

Jed was wringing his hands and looking exceedingly unhappy.

"He'll get me, sooner or later, I know it. One way or another, he never gives up a thing he has set his heart on; and he wants this locket very much. Oh! won't you take it, and keep it for me, please?" he asked.

"Why, certainly I will, only not just now. How do we know but what he is watching us, even at this very minute. Pretend to put it away again, Jed, and manage to slip it to me unseen. I promise you that it will never leave my person, and when you want it again, all you have to do is to ask."

"Thank you. If you only knew how much better you have made me feel. Perhaps in some way I can be taken from him and placed in another home. Oh! I am willing to work just as hard as I can if only it *was* a home!"

So presently Frank secreted the gold locket in an inner pocket, where it could not be lost. He knew that there was a deep mystery connected somehow with the little trinket, and while he could not fathom it just then, in good time, no doubt, the secret must appear.

Every time he felt it there his thoughts were bound to go out toward poor Jed, and the important message which his dying mother had meant to give him at the time she pressed the locket into his hands.

CHAPTER VII

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

"How long do we stay in this camp, fellows?" asked Bluff.

"A few days only," replied Frank, with a mysterious smile.

"Look here, you've got something you're keeping from us," said Jerry boldly.

"That's what I was thinking. So out with it, Frank. No secrets, please."

Will assumed a mock threatening appearance, holding the big spoon up as though it were a baton, for they were washing up the supper things at the time.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to, boys, seeing that I couldn't expect to keep the secret much longer. Listen, then, and you shall hear. Have any of you ever hunted through these mountains to any extent?" asked Frank.

"I've been up here once or twice, but it's mostly new to me," said Jerry.

"Well, I studied a chart of the place, which,

by the way, is in my ditty bag at this minute. Please hand it over to me, Bluff. Now, here you are."

He opened it up, and the others eagerly bent over, all dish-washing operations being temporarily suspended in the common interest.

"Here's the road we came by, and about this spot is where our present camp is located. Just two miles beyond lies Lake Surprise, which they tell me is a beautiful little body of water," went on Frank, pointing with his lead pencil on the map.

"Yes, I've heard about it, too. They say it springs upon you as you turn a bend of the old logging road, and no one ever fails to gasp with surprise at the beautiful sight. Hence the name. Well, go on, Frank," observed Will.

"Three days from now we will be encamped on the shore of that same lake, if all goes well, and by that night there will be an arrival that must astonish you. No use trying to guess, for you couldn't in a year. It will be Adolphus, with the team, and what do you think he will be toting up there?"

"More grub," answered Bluff promptly.

A shake of the head in the negative followed.

"Not the girls?" suggested Jerry eagerly, and with a sly blush.

"Well, much as I would like to see them, that is not the true answer. It struck me that since the time the Indians used to paddle around that little gem of a lake there had never been a canoe floating on its waters, and my father proposed that he send up our boats, so that we could have a glorious week to wind up with."

"Hurrah!"

"A glorious thought on your part, Frank."

"Won't it be fun, though! And the fishing must be fine, since no one ever comes up here much." This from Jerry, who always had an eye out for the sport.

"So make the most of this camp while we are here. It's a pretty good one for its kind, with those rocks heaped up as a back-rest, and the trees stretching far away all around. All it lacks is water in front to make it perfect."

"Right you are, Frank. And those same rocks look pretty wild, too. I noticed a big crack right back of our fire, there. Perhaps at some time in the dim past a bear or other wild beast may have had its den in there," said Will.

"Cracky! That is so! And by the same token, I mean to explore the place in the morning. Who knows what a fellow might find in a hole like that?"

"Better go slow, Jerry. Remember that this

place up here has been getting a bad name. You might run across the ghost of Oak Ridge in the course of your poking around into such holes," laughed Frank.

"H'm! That wouldn't please me a little bit. If we have to come on that specter thing, I'd rather it was when we were all in a bunch," replied the one addressed.

"Yes, in union there is strength. But don't forget, all of you, that one of the main objects in our selecting the Sunset Mountains for our present vacation trip was the hope of discovering the truth about that same ghost. Hello! I declare if here isn't another visitor!"

All of them jumped as Frank uttered these last words. Poor Jed gave a piteous little whimper, as though his fears had not wholly subsided by any means.

Some one was seen striding boldly toward the campfire, coming from the direction of the road. Immediately Jerry gave utterance to an exclamation.

"Why, as sure as I live, I believe it's Andy!" he said.

"That's who it is—Andy Lasher," echoed Will.

"Now what do you suppose that fellow wants here?" muttered Bluff, who was not so thorough-

ly convinced of the reform of Andy as some of his chums.

The advancing form drew rapidly near.

"Hello, Andy!" said Jerry, holding out his hand.

Jerry had saved the life of the town bully the previous fall, when during a storm a great tree had fallen and pinned him to the ground. Ever since Andy had tried to show his gratitude toward his benefactor. At the same time he would not make friends to any extent with the other three boys.

"Howdy, Jerry?" said the newcomer gruffly, as he accepted the offered hand.

He seemed to be carrying an old grip, as though he might be on his way across the mountains to the bustling manufacturing town of Chester, where there were always chances for obtaining a job.

"Won't you sit down, Andy? We're long done supper, but if you're hungry we can stir up something."

Jerry always said "we," as though he wished to impress it upon the other's mind that the balance of his crowd were with him in all he said and did.

"Ain't got time, Jerry. Got some business that's takin' me across here to-night. I knowed

you fellers was a-campin' round here, an' I wanted to tell you something I thought you orter know. Pet Peters and his crowd is up here, and they mean to make you trouble some way or other. That's all. I'll be goin' on, now, Jerry."

Andy was plainly nervous. He had always been a bold spirit, so that it could hardly be the presence of the other boys that affected him. Frank wondered what ailed him, but of course he would not ask.

"Then you won't stop over night with us, Andy?" asked Jerry.

"Mighty kind of you to say that, but I can't, not this time. I'm in a big hurry, you see. Saw Pet and the boys hatching up something and thought I'd just drop in while goin' past, to put you wise. So-long, Jerry."

Andy completely ignored the others. Not that they cared in the least, for of old there had been war to the knife between this big fellow and the members of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club. They could not easily forget how vindictive he had ever been in his pursuit of the four chums.

He wheeled, and walked away, leaving the campers staring after him. So he presently vanished from their vision, heading back toward the "tote" road.

"Well," said Will, with a little laugh, "what d'ye think of that?"

"I say it's good of him to go to the trouble to warn us. He didn't know that we had any idea those fellows were up here, and he came in good faith, meaning to save us from being caught napping," said Jerry stoutly.

"Oh, that's all right, Jerry. I admit that Andy is trying to walk the straight path, and that all his success, so far, is due to you. But what do you think he is doing up here?" demanded Bluff.

"I don't know; and, more than that, I don't believe it's any of my business," returned Jerry promptly and significantly.

"Meaning that it isn't any of mine, either. Granted, for the sake of argument, but all the same I can't help wondering."

"Yes, that's the lawyer of it, always wanting to know. Perhaps he just felt like taking a walk," jeered Jerry.

"More than likely he's on his way across the Sunset Mountains to Chester, looking for a job. I understand from the map that there's a good road all the way over," said Frank, always ready to soothe the two belligerents.

"Well, in that case, I hope he gets a good one. You mark my words, fellows, that Andy Lasher

is going to come out all right yet," declared Jerry.

"It seemed to me he didn't like to see us up here," remarked Will.

"Well, now, that was my idea, too, though I don't know why he should feel that way about it. These mountains are free to all. A few trappers spend their winters up here, Jesse Wilcox among them, sometimes, but I guess our camping for two weeks isn't going to interfere with anybody's enjoyment," laughed Frank.

"Except the ghost's," remarked Bluff soberly, at which all laughed.

They were seated about in various attitudes a short time later. Will, as usual, busied himself with his camera, which he was never weary of handling. Bluff had started to oil his precious repeating gun for the third time since leaving town, just as if he expected the dampness to play havoc with its shooting powers. Frank was writing something in his diary, for he made it a practice to keep a log of each outing, which had proved a great pleasure to all the members of the club during the long winter evenings, when they were snow-bound at home.

Jerry was talking in a low tone with the fugitive bound boy, on the other side of the fire, and

drawing out some little facts in connection with his life that seemed to interest him intensely.

It looked like a wonderfully peaceful scene. The fire blazed cheerily, sending up tongues of flame. At times the night air wafted the smoke back into the crevice among the rocks close at hand, which the boys had noticed, and intended to explore in the morning.

Suddenly, without a breath of warning, all this was changed as if by the wand of a magician. There was a horrible roar, that thrilled the campers, and a great black body came wallowing out from the crevice in the rocks, plunging headlong into the fire, which was scattered hither and thither by the furious attack.

"A bear!" shouted Frank, as he rolled over out of the way.

CHAPTER VIII

EVERYTHING SEEMS TO COME THEIR WAY

"I TOLD you so!" shouted Bluff, as he fell over in his eagerness to get up.

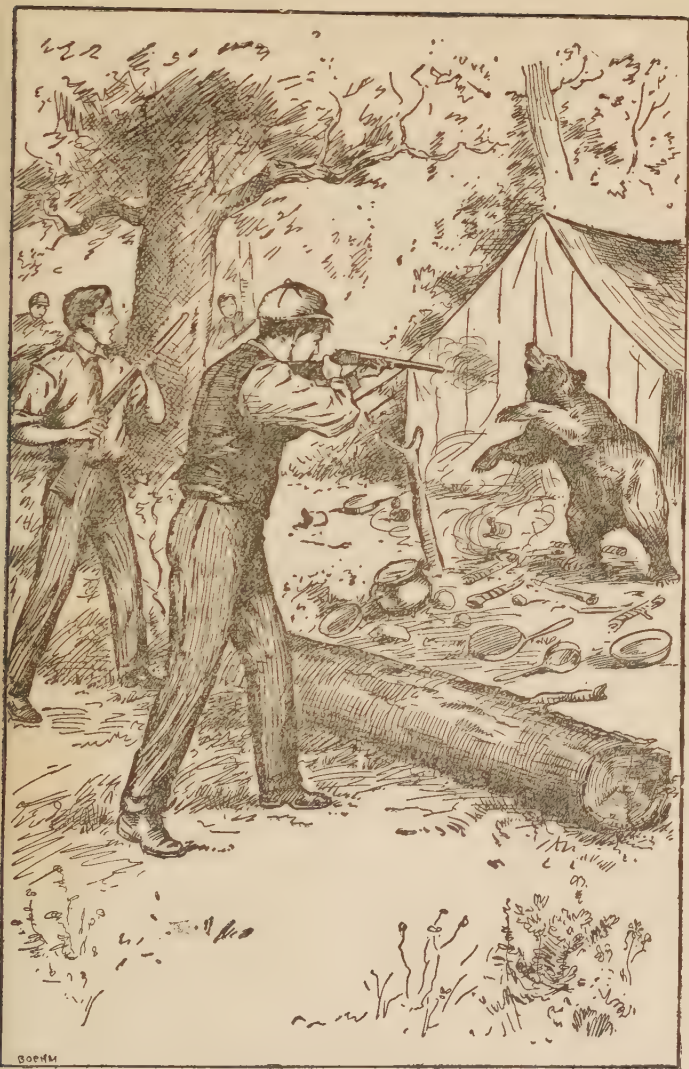
"Somebody shoot him!" bellowed Jerry, who was directly in the path of the bear, if the rolling monster concluded to keep on after he had extinguished the several little fires in his hairy hide.

Frank had a method in his activity in rolling away from the danger zone. He remembered that he had placed his gun at the foot of the tree that had the gnarly trunk, and in a case of this sort the quicker a fellow laid hands on some means of defense the better.

Now Bruin was once more upon his feet, having succeeded in putting out the few sparks that had threatened to set him on fire, so that if he ran through the forest he must have resembled an animated torch.

Bang!

That was surely the voice of the repeating gun.



GOEDM

BANG! THAT WAS SURELY THE VOICE OF THE REPEATING GUN.

The Outdoor Chums in the Forest.

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Bluff had had it in his hands at the time the bear, angered by the constant inrush of bitter smoke, had dashed from his den, among the blazing fagots.

It had taken Bluff just about five seconds to get himself together and raise his gun to a level with the struggling black form among the scattered brands of the disturbed fire.

"Whoop! Give him some more, *you!*" shouted Jerry, peering over the top of the log behind which he had now taken refuge.

Bang!

That shot came from another quarter. Frank did not mean to be left out in the cold entirely, apparently.

Then Bluff took up the refrain again, which was an invitation for Frank to make use of his second barrel. By that time the bear had ceased making any attempt at escape, and was lying, inert, on the ground. Four charges, even of bird shot, when fired only ten feet away, at the most, can do the execution of as many bullets of large caliber.

"Well done, fellows! I congratulate the brave Nimrods!" vociferated Jerry, coming out from his place of refuge and waving his cap in the air.

Snap! Will had made another flash picture.

"Wouldn't have lost that one for a good deal, I tell you," he said.

Jerry, in his demonstrative way, went around shaking hands with every one, even little Jed, who had been petrified with horror during the entire proceedings, and could only stare at what was passing.

"Talk about your luck! What d'ye think of that? Meat just drops into our hands as we sit around our campfire. Tell me about your Israelites in the desert, and the manna that they picked up—we don't even have to move to get a full larder."

"Well, bear's meat may please some, but it's pretty tough," commented Will.

"Come off, you practical man! Where's your sporting blood? Think of the delight of sitting here and chewing on meat that fell to your gun. What odds if it is as tough as an old cow? It's *game*! That ought to settle it. Imagination can make even bear meat seem as tender as spring lamb," declared Jerry.

"And there's the skin. That will make a bully old rug for my den!" exclaimed Bluff, looking boldly at Frank, as though challenging him to dispute his claim.

"You're welcome to it, seeing that I have several already, but I'm afraid you'll find it a pretty

poor specimen at this season of the year. The pelts are never good for much until fall sets in. The beast has hardly stopped shedding last winter's coat of hair," laughed Frank.

"Well, that *was* a bear's den, after all! We didn't go far wrong, did we? And as for me, I'm itching to investigate it right away. Frank, let's get a few torches together and crawl in. Will you?"

Jerry was as eager as ever to examine things. He could not wait until morning came, now that a bear had actually issued forth from the crevice in the rocks.

"There may be another in there," suggested Bluff meaningly.

"All right, then. Something is due to fall to my gun, I guess. Don't you think for a minute that everything is going to come your way. Better save your wind for blowing up your bed a little later. You'll probably need it all," remarked Jerry, who had been sore ever since the preceding night, when his rival had come in just a trifle ahead in the great wind act.

Frank hesitated. He knew it was hardly wise to creep into that crack in the rocks so soon after the bear had issued forth; for if there was a mate inside, doubtless they would have a severe conflict.

At the same time he knew Jerry full well, and was certain that once he had taken the notion into his head he would carry it out, if he had to go alone.

So he quickly made up his mind to go.

"All right, if you are bent on it; get the torches ready. I imagine, though, it is only a little cave, after all, and we will be back in a jiffy," he said, as he pushed new shells into his gun and fastened his belt around his waist, so that in case of necessity he would have a further supply.

Meanwhile, Will was rebuilding the fire. Bluff, aided by Jed, had succeeded in pulling the dead bear further away, all the while muttering delighted phrases at the great luck that had come his way so unexpectedly. He would never be able to sleep that night for wanting to feast his eyes on the big black bulk that represented such speedy work with his repeating gun.

"All ready, pard," said Jerry just then.

He had several pieces of good burning wood under his arm, and carried one that he had lighted at the fire, in his hand. With his other hand he clasped his gun, ready for business.

"Here, let me carry the torches, Jerry. If a chance comes, you ought to be prepared for it," said Frank as they reached the opening.

That was his usual generous way, always want-

ing every one to get his share of the fun and glory.

They found that the cleft was really wider than any of them had suspected up to now. Moreover, it showed plain evidences of having been used by some wild animal for a long time, as there was a regular trail running into it.

"Looks good to me," declared Jerry, who dearly loved to be prowling about just such a place as this, with the odor of a wild animal's den greeting his nostrils as they pushed slowly into the hole in the rocks.

Frank thought he had known spots more pleasant, but then he was game for anything in this line, so they pushed on, following the turns in the crack until finally Jerry, who was in advance, stopped.

"I see something ahead there. Thought it moved a little. Raise the light, please."

"You're not going to shoot, I hope!" exclaimed Frank, who knew that such a move would be the extreme of foolishness, since at the best Jerry could only expect to wound, and a bear in that condition was to be dreaded.

"Certainly not, unless I can see the rascal decently. Now let's advance slowly. Can you see anything yet?" asked the other.

"Only a dark spot. I hardly think it's a bear,

for by now we would have heard growls of some sort," Frank replied.

"Cubs, perhaps; this is the time of year for them."

"Yes, but that was not a mother bear Bluff shot, you see, and the father would hardly be in here with the cubs. I never heard of such a thing. No. You see, just as I said, it's only a lot of stuff where the old chap had his bed. The smoke made him mad, it seems. Must have had a previous experience in getting smoked out, and simply couldn't stand for it."

"And the cave ends here, that is, the part of it big enough for our passage. So, after a look around, perhaps we'd better go back. To tell the truth, I thought I heard one of the boys shouting just then," said Jerry, whose ears were unusually keen.

"Probably Bluff, just working off a little more of his enthusiasm. This has been a big night for him, Jerry. And that gun—well, it won't do for you to poke fun at it any more, you understand."

They investigated to see what the draught of air meant, and concluded that the crevice might have another opening further on, though it was out of their reach, by reason of the smallness of the passage.

"Back to the camp it is, then. No more bears to-night, I reckon," sighed Jerry, visibly disappointed because he was not to be permitted to share in the honors that had fallen to Bluff.

So they began to make their way back to the exit.

Frank pushed on with increased speed, for it seemed to him that he, too, had heard some sort of sounds outside that might bear investigation. Could the farmer and his man have returned during their absence, and, cowing the two guardians of the camp, carried the bound boy off to his servitude again?

The thought annoyed him more than he could say, and it was in that frame of mind that he and Jerry emerged from the cleft. They found an apparently deserted camp, with not one of the three in sight.

"Hello, there, Bluff! Will! Where are you?" cried Frank in dismay.

Then a head was cautiously poked up from behind a log—the head of Will.

"Say! Is it gone?" asked this individual in thrilling tones.

"What gone—the bear?" demanded Frank, looking at the dark mass near by.

"No; the ghost! It was here just now, and

poor Bluff fell over in a heap when he jumped up to get his gun. Oh! it was terrible! terrible!" groaned Will, as he came crawling cautiously forth, and looking half frightened to death.

CHAPTER IX

FRANK TRIES TO SOLVE THE RIDDLE

FRANK and Jerry gazed at each other in utter consternation.

"Tell me about that, will you? The ghost walked, and while we were away visiting, too! Was there ever such beastly luck?" groaned the latter, in dejection.

"But what's this about Bluff? You say he fell over. Was he struck with anything? And where's Jed?" asked Frank, eager to reach a conclusion.

"I'm here, all right," said a voice, and the bound boy came crawling out of a dense thicket close by. He was shivering, and his face looked white and drawn, as with fear.

"Bluff fell right over there by the bear, Frank. See! There he is now, getting up again. Thank goodness! He isn't dead, anyway!" cried Will.

Frank sprang to the side of Bluff.

"What ails you, old fellow? Are you badly hurt?" he asked.

"I don't just know. Seemed as if the sky fell on me; but I reckon I must have banged my head against this tree here in my excitement. I **never** noticed the pesky tree, I declare. All I could see was that terrible thing standing there and waving its awful bony hand. Gee! I was scared! I admit it, boys. Never got such a shock in my whole life," said Bluff, rubbing his forehead, where quite a large lump told of contact with some hard substance.

"Do you really mean to say that the ghost appeared to both of you while we were away?" asked Frank, hardly able to believe his ears, and looking to see if the others could be putting up some joke on Jerry and himself; but that lump was genuine, all right, and the look of pain on Bluff's face meant sincerity.

"Sure he was here. He kept waving us away all the time," declared Will.

"Evidently, then, from what you say, he does not like campers on his preserves, and would warn us to go home. H'm! That is something to be considered when trying to understand this riddle. Did the ghost speak at all?"

Bluff looked inquiringly at Will.

"If it did, I didn't hear it. I just gave a yell as I saw Bluff keel over, and rolled back behind this log, where I cowered till I heard Frank call.

Oh! what a chance I lost to snapshot a real, genuine ghost!" And Will shook his head with disgust over his timidity.

"I wish you had done it; then we'd have something tangible to work on. As it is, we hardly know where we stand. The evidence of a frightened person is hardly enough to prove anything," mused Frank.

"Look here! Can either of you describe the ghost?" demanded Jerry.

Again Will and Bluff exchanged mournful glances.

"Not so you could understand it, I guess, boys. All I know is that he seemed ten feet high to me, and was all in white, that seemed to flicker, just like you see phosphorus in the dark," said the former.

Frank laughed.

"Exactly. I knew you would say that before you spoke. It is always the accompaniment of modern ghosts. In fact, you'd think these visitors from another world had to come out of a volcano in order to get here, and the sulphur and phosphorus-match smell hung to their garments. How did this wonderful thing vanish?"

Bluff shook his head.

"I wasn't in the running after that tree kicked me. Perhaps either of these others could say,"

he admitted candidly, still rubbing his bump, which Frank was getting arnica to relieve.

"Why, so far as I know, it just *went*, that's all. Now you see it, and now you don't. But it was a sure-enough ghost, Frank. I could prove it if I hadn't fallen over that log before I thought of my camera," avowed Will.

"What strange things we see when we haven't got our gun," jeered Jerry, who did not seem to fully believe the story of the others.

"You appear to doubt their words," said Frank, turning on his chum questioningly.

"Oh, I don't think they're faking. That pigeon egg on Bluff's noble brow proves that he was scared nigh to death, and banged into a tree for keeps; but I don't believe in ghosts. They saw something—yes, but I've got a little suspicion that somebody's putting up a fine old joke on the crowd."

"Somebody, eh? Perhaps you'll go further, and state which way those aroused suspicions of yours slant?" demanded the injured Bluff, as he bent his head so that Frank could fasten a handkerchief, saturated with arnica, about his brow.

"Well, didn't we receive plain warning, not an hour ago, that there were fellows hovering around these regions bent on playing some sort

of practical joke on us? How about that Pet Peters crowd, eh?" said Jerry firmly.

"Frank, do you believe that possible?" asked Will.

The one addressed looked serious.

"To tell the truth, I can't take much stock in it," he admitted finally.

"And why?" demanded Jerry aggressively.

Bluff was romping off with all the honors, and Jerry begrudged him the chance. He had won the contest the first night; the bear had fallen to his gun just recently, in conjunction with Frank, of course; and now he had been favored with the first sight of the wonderful ghost of Oak Ridge, the presence of which had stirred the entire community around Centerville.

Why, really, Jerry even envied his rival the possession of that lump on his forehead, since it was a mark to signify that he had been in the brunt of battle.

"Well, according to what the boys tell, this thing that has appeared to them was too astonishing to be the work of those crude plotters. Pet and his cronies can hatch up mean games, like throwing rocks into a camp, digging a pit to catch a fellow as though he were wild game, and such pranks, but they could never think up or carry out a big thing like this. If it is a game,

depend on it, the one responsible for the deception is a smarter man than any of our old enemies."

"A game! Do you think that ghost wasn't real?" asked Bluff.

"Of course I do. Why, if I believed in such supernatural appearances, do you imagine for a minute I'd come up here hunting experiences? No, sir! I'd stay safe at home. Surely there must be some sort of reason for this party to play at ghost. I'm trying to put things together. Why should any one want to make people keep away from Oak Ridge?"

The others began to comprehend what Frank had in mind.

"I believe you're getting close on to its track, Frank," said Jerry confidently.

"Perhaps, after all, we couldn't have seen very well," admitted Will, grinning as boys do when they feel that they have done a foolish thing.

"The only thing I can swear to is that it hurt," vowed Bluff.

"Well, we don't intend to go away to please Mr. Ghost. Perhaps then he may pay us another visit," laughed Frank, tying the bandage securely.

"Hey! Leave me the sight of one eye, anyway, or I'll be doing it some more, and have lumps all over my poor cranium. That's better, Frank.

I only wish I had got my gun—that's what," pursued the injured member of the group.

"Well, I advised you before not to use it on the ghost. If it proves to be a man, how badly you'd feel if you had shot a harmless lunatic," observed Frank.

"I guess that's so," muttered the other, shrugging his shoulders.

"Things seem to be happening to us mighty fast this time," observed Will.

"I should remark to that effect. Here we have only been away from home parts of two days and nights, and see how many strange things have come about. The raid of the camp by the Peters crowd, the finding of Jed, the coming of the farmer, and our bold defiance, the rush of old Bruin out of his cave into our fire, and now the appearance of the ghost on the scene," declared Jerry.

"You forgot one little event—the passing of Andy Lasher," put in Frank.

"Well, I didn't think that amounted to anything worth mentioning."

"You can never tell. When the story has all been told some of the things that at the time appeared very insignificant may loom up as big as mountains. But it does look as if we were bound to keep things hustling so long as we stay

up here in the Sunset Mountains," remarked Frank.

Jerry was working at a long piece of rope.

"Just let that fine, healthy spirit from the other side of the Styx show up while I'm around, that's all," he said resolutely.

"What are you making?" asked Bluff.

"Why, that cowboy who was in town last year taught me something about throwing a rope, and I'm going to keep ready for Mr. Ghost," he avowed.

"Oh! If I could only get you in the act of lassoing him, what wouldn't I give for the chance of a picture!" sighed Will enthusiastically.

"I see very plainly that if you keep along with us much longer there'll be the greatest lot of freak pictures ever seen on the market. It makes me shudder to think what rowdy things my parents will see me doing," came from Jerry.

"It'll be a long time before I get the equal of that one where you are chasing around the tree with those wild dogs in pursuit. A fellow never could have kinder chums than I have—so willing to pose to please me. But it's really worth while," said Will.

All of them were tired by this time, and soon preparations began, looking to a night of rest. The rubber mattresses were blown up again, and

this time Jerry proved an easy winner. Bluff, of course, declared that his swollen forehead was the cause of his defeat, and immediately challenged the winner to another match on the very next night.

And while the rest slept, Frank took the first watch, wondering whether that remarkable ghost would condescend to pay him a visit.

CHAPTER X

THE "TOTE" ROAD IN THE FOREST

"WAKE up there, lazybones!"

Frank opened his eyes. The sun was actually shining in through the front of his tent, much to his mortification and surprise.

"That's about the first time I've ever been caught napping," he remarked to Will, who was now ding-donging a big spoon on the bottom of a frying-pan, to indicate that breakfast was ready.

Frank had been up the greater part of the night, on guard. He had assumed most of the care of the camp himself, only dropping down when the hour was getting on toward dawn.

The others, knowing this, had been careful not to arouse him, but had gone on with the duties of the morning.

"It's good of you, boys, to let me sleep so long. I guess I must have needed it, too. Count me in before you've been at it five minutes," and so saying he slipped through the woods to a lit-

the brook near by, where they could hear him splashing about at a great rate.

When breakfast was done they began to consider what the duties of the day were to be. They had come up here into the mountains not to hunt, for the close season was on all edible game, but to knock around and have a good time generally. Incidentally, of course, they expected to look into that ghost story, and endeavor to learn just how much truth lay back of it.

Already considerable progress had been made, Frank thought.

He had prodded the boys who were in the camp at the time the specter showed up, and upon putting their stories together, came to the conclusion that the ghost must have appeared on the east side of the place.

Hither Frank hied himself immediately after he had finished eating. Dropping down on his hands and knees, he commenced to examine the ground with all the care of a red trailer of the plains and forest.

"Find anything?" asked Jerry, joining him.

Neither of the other chums would even so much as look. They had had an experience, and were quite content to let it rest at that. The absentees might take it into their heads to continue the treatment, if they wished. Perhaps

they might not feel quite so ambitious after one chance to look at that grim white figure.

"Nothing to boast of. You see the ground is rather hard here, and a man might stand all around without making much of an impression. Still, it seems to me as if that might be the imprint of a shoe, and this, too."

He pointed as he spoke, and Jerry bent lower to look.

"I think you're right. Somebody stepped there, that's sure. Whether last night, or a week of Sundays ago, I wouldn't care to say," he admitted.

"Well, you ought to be able to place it better than that, for if you stop to think, you must remember that it rained just three days back."

"Correct! And that would have washed the footprint out completely, eh? But if we only had a hound here, used to following a human trail, wouldn't it be the easy thing to run down Mr. Ghost?" chuckled Jerry.

"It certainly would; but we happen to have nothing of the kind. I know of a couple of dogs able to do it. Colonel Halpin brought them up from the South. Don't you remember early last spring they were borrowed by the wardens of the penitentiary to track an escaped convict? They got him, too," remarked Frank.

"Yes, one of them; the other got clean away. I heard he walked in water, and in that way broke the trail."

"Well, the fellow who told me said the convict had some red pepper along with him. When he found the dogs were on his track he scattered this around. The poor beasts almost choked to death, and were not fit to scent a thing for days. That was a clever rascal, all right," said Frank.

"I declare I'm almost tempted to say he deserved to get away; but if we can't follow the tracks of Mr. Ghost I suppose we'll have to just wait until he chooses to pay us another visit, eh, Frank?"

"That's the only remedy; and if what I suspect is true, I imagine we'll be apt to see something of him again soon. We're not wanted in this region, and he means to let us know it frequently."

"Do you think it can be a crazy man's freak?" queried Jerry.

"Honestly, I don't. There is a motive back of this thing, but I'll be frank with you, and say that as yet I don't catch it. Perhaps the idea may flash in on me at any time. I have several suspicions, but nothing to prove that they can hold water."

Presently, therefore, the two searchers wan-

dered back to where Will and Bluff sat talking with the fugitive bound boy.

Bluff looked up at them with a grin.

"S'pose you've got it all fixed now, and can tell us the name and antecedents of our ghost? It's mighty kind of you to go to all that trouble," he gurgled.

Neither of the others answered, for, indeed, what could they say?

"If you want to save that bearskin, I'll show you how to take it off, Bluff," remarked Frank later on.

"Well, now, I would, the worst kind. Even if some of the hairs do come out it will make a dandy rug. When you're ready, tell me what to do," replied the other.

So they busied themselves in that way. Will was developing his first roll of films in the tank, which could be used as well in daylight as at night, or in a dark-room. Jerry wandered off, with his gun over his arm, not looking for game, but with the intention of protecting himself against any possible danger. As for Jed, filled to repletion, he seemed quite a different boy from the fear-haunted chap of the previous night.

Jerry was a curious boy, always seeking to learn the why and wherefore of everything that happened. He did not believe in the ghost sto-

ries, and only wished he could run across something to prove the fact.

It was with this faint hope springing up in his heart that he sauntered out of the camp and into the great forest that stretched far away toward the lake, on the borders of which Centerville and Newtonport lay.

Looking back of him, he could see the Sunset Mountains very near, the sides covered with the same dense forest growth.

"Let's see, what have I got to look out for?" he was saying to himself, as he upraised a finger with each count: "The ghost, for one; those Apaches of Pet Peters, for two; that fine, hearty old gentleman, Farmer Dobson, for three. Well, a fellow would need to have three pairs of eyes to keep watch of all those perils at once. Perhaps there is another bear near by, the mate of the one Frank and Bluff knocked over. Well, I'm willing, if she only shows up."

So he was talking to himself as he wandered on. He did not mean to go very far away from the camp, at the time he started, but somehow it was so easy to just keep walking on. The day was fine, and he felt like taking exercise.

Jerry did not forget to keep his eyes about him all the while. It would not be pleasant to have those hovering plagues, the boys from town, drop

down on his head from some tree, and he did not hanker after the experience.

Somehow his thoughts ranged back to Jed. Jerry was very much interested in the fortunes of the little bound boy, and had determined that his father, as well as the lawyer parent of Bluff, should do something to relieve him from his distress.

"I wonder what there is about that little gold locket that makes old Dobson want to get it in his possession so much? It must be proof of something; and surely there must be money in it for the possessor, if one only knew how to go about it. That's what we don't know, and Dobson does. But Frank will think it out. Nothing gets past him for long, now."

Frank was far from guessing the secret, as yet, for just at that very particular minute he sat in camp looking slyly at the very locket Jerry referred to, and trying to figure out how such a thing as Jed's mother's picture could be valuable to her cousin, the old skinflint farmer.

Jerry, having gone as far as he dared, was now beginning to hedge; that is, he had turned to the left, showing that he meant to return to the camp, but by a different route from the one already taken.

Since in another day or so they meant to change their camping-ground, and pass on to the shores of Surprise Lake, among the mountains, he thought he might as well see as much of this territory as possible.

Although he had taken his gun along, Jerry really did not believe he would see anything of a character to make him glad he had carried it. Still, if those followers of Pet Peters were hovering around they would fight shy of him on seeing that he carried a weapon.

He changed the tenor of his thoughts to Andy, and began to wonder what it could have been that brought him up into that lonely country, where there were no farms.

He was aroused from his reflections by a sound that startled him. This was undoubtedly the bellow of a bull, if Jerry knew what that was, and he believed he did. Looking up, he saw something that startled him.

Down the "tote" road, which he happened to be following, something was rushing toward him with lowered head, stopping occasionally to shake his horns and give a renewed bellow as of rage.

What he had heard Farmer Dobson say on the preceding night flashed through his mind, and Jerry knew that he was now looking upon the

missing prize bull. He could not remember of having lost any bull himself, but the animal was heading his way, and evidently meant to make his immediate acquaintance.

CHAPTER XI

FARMER DOBSON AND HIS PRIZE BULL

THIS was a species of game that Jerry was not looking for that morning, thank you.

Perhaps bulls were not mentioned as being included in the closed season, but they had a value attached to them, and he was not in the humor to give Farmer Dobson any sort of club to hold over his head.

Jerry did not like the idea of taking to a tree, either. Flight, then, would seem to be his only course.

To leave the "tote" road and dash wildly through the forest, was his plan, as he saw the bull coming so hurriedly in his direction.

Before he could even start toward putting this idea into play another actor had appeared on the scene.

Jerry saw a figure rushing through the scrub with the evident idea of intercepting the oncoming bull. He immediately recognized the flam-

ing red bandana which he had noticed around the thick neck of the farmer on the occasion of his visit to the camp.

Then Jerry grinned, nor did he make the first move toward leaving. Stepping to one side, he screened himself behind a friendly tree and waited.

"There's his bull, all right. Now let's see how he leads him home by the ring in his nose. It will show me how," was what he was saying as he peeped around the base of his ambush.

The bull still came on. Somehow he seemed to take a new lease of life at sight of Farmer Dobson. It may have been caused by the flaming handkerchief just below the red face of the tiller of the soil. Then again, possibly, a list of indignities suffered in the past at the hands of this same owner occurred to the bull.

Jerry saw the man flaunt his arms wildly in the air. He was shouting loudly, too, and perhaps in the past the sound of his hoarse voice had cowed the bull.

"But the bully old chap doesn't seem to care a snap now for all his ranting—not so you could notice!" exclaimed the observer, in delight.

This fact finally became apparent to the farmer. By that time the animal was within twenty feet of him, and still advancing. Indeed, no one could

blame Dobson for turning and running. The appearance of that big beast, with lowered head, and tail standing out stiff in the rear, during his charge, was enough to send terror to the heart of even a braver man than Farmer Dobson.

"Three to one on the bull!" exclaimed Jerry, unmindful of the fact that the chase was heading toward him.

Fast though the bulky farmer ran, the bull overhauled him in speedy order. Jerry fairly held his breath as the collision occurred, and gripped his gun as though half tempted to shoot.

Then it was all over but the shouting. The watching boy saw something bulky ascending gracefully into the air; nor was he in the least doubt as to what this figure with the sprawling arms and legs must be.

Farmer Dobson was getting a rise in the world. He crashed through the lower branches of an oak, and stuck there.

"Wow!" exclaimed Jerry, breathing again. "He's straddling a limb! What luck!"

He was tempted to let out a tremendous yell, so charged had he become with excitement, but he caught himself just in the nick of time.

"Ginger! That would turn the attention of good old Bowser from Dobson to me. A perch in a tree doesn't tempt me just now. Wonder

what is going to happen next?" was what Jerry kept saying to himself.

He soon knew.

The bull was pawing the ground angrily and bellowing at the foot of the tree, now and then casting a look upward. Evidently he could not understand why the ripe plum did not fall down again so that he could practice some more.

The farmer by this time had recovered his wind to some extent. His heavy voice could be heard shouting at the animal, as though in that way he could send him about his business.

"The bull doesn't seem to care whether school keeps or not. He's got his man up a tree, and I expect he means to keep him there. What's that Dobson is saying? Can he have seen me?"

"Hey, you fellers! Come here and chase this beast away! A dollar apiece if ye coax him off, d'ye hear?"

Jerry realized that from his elevated perch Dobson must have sighted some others near by. Possibly they were lumbermen, looking over this section for some purpose.

"Cracky! I'd like to see 'em coax! Perhaps the circus ain't over yet," chuckled Jerry, with all a boy's love for fun.

Shouts were heard in the near distance. Jerry

pricked up his ears at catching the boyish inflection of these outcries.

"Those fellows are Pet Peters and his crowd. Gee-whittaker! What luck for me, with this reserved seat at the show!" he laughed.

He heard the crash of the undergrowth as the newcomers advanced on the run. The promise of a big dollar apiece was an attractive lure to the Peters lot, and there was little they would not have attempted to earn so easily.

Each of them had armed himself with a stout stick of some sort. Some were long, and others short, but all promised to be serviceable in chasing away the domestic animal that had treed the farmer.

The bull paid no attention to the new arrivals until they were closing in on him from all sides.

"Say! I believe that old critter is playing 'possum. He doesn't want to scare the Peters crowd till he gets 'em in close. Now look what's going to happen! Whoop!"

The bull had suddenly whirled around, and made a bee-line for the nearest of the circle. That worthy happened to be Pet himself. His courage oozed out at sight of that terrible beast bearing swiftly down upon him.

Throwing away his stick he started to run, but the bull was too close upon him.

"Up he goes!" shouted Jerry in admiration, as he saw the figure of Pet whirling into the branches of another tree, where he clung desperately, half frightened to death.

This time the bull did not wait to strike the ground with his hoofs, and bellow. He seemed to know that there was plenty more excitement close by, if only he looked for it.

"Run!" shrieked Jerry, as the animal caught sight of a second chap trying to scuttle off.

Every boy was by this time rattled. They no longer had any thought of hostile action toward the old hero of many a battle. Those little black horns, each surmounted with a shining brass ball, sent a spasm of terror to their hearts, and not the promise of five dollars apiece would tempt them to linger.

But the bull was not satisfied with the scattering of his enemies. He yearned for more exercise, apparently, for he started to chase, first this fleeing boy, and then, turning aside, galloped after another, until he had the entire bunch panic-stricken, most of them howling in an excess of fear.

Jerry just lay down on the ground and shook with laughter. He could not remember when such a feast had come his way.

At the same time he was wise enough to do

nothing to attract the attention of the bull. Let the animal return to his two treed prisoners, if he wished, and keep them straddling those limbs a few hours. The experience would do them good, perhaps.

Having chased the aggressors away, the bull now came trotting back to the scene of his victory. It was simply ludicrous to see the manner in which he passed from one tree to the other, bellowing, and shaking that big head of his as if daring the human birds to come down.

"Hey, there, Mister Dobson! Ain't yuh goin' to get that bull away? I don't want to sit up here all day an' night. It's yer business to drop down an' coax him to go home!" shouted Pet.

What the farmer said made Jerry shake all over with amusement; but while it seemed to act as a safety-valve to his feelings, perhaps it would not look well in print, being a series of vigorous exclamations.

"Say, I'll hold ye for damages, Farmer Dobson!" Pet wailed, trying to rub himself in half a dozen places at once.

"Go to grass! I ain't doing nothing; just sitting here! Hold the bull for damages, if ye want to," answered the other, who had a few pet bruises of his own that needed attention, and

which kept him from feeling humorous over the situation.

"How we a-goin' to get down?" next asked Pet.

"The critter'll get tired after a while, and wander off. All ye have to do is to sit still, and try not to excite him any more. I'll give ye the dollar all the same, boy, 'cause I seen ye earn it; but them other fellers run off, an' they don't get a cent."

"What do I get for sticking the whole performance out?" called Jerry just then, at the same time taking care not to show himself to the bull.

The farmer and Pet looked in vain to see the speaker.

"It's that Jerry Wallington. I seen him when we was runnin' up. Say, Farmer, ain't there any way to sick the measly old bull on him?" called Pet.

"You'll have to excuse me, gentlemen, but I've got a previous engagement. Good-by!" Saying which, Jerry slid off, keeping the tree between himself and the animal until he thought it safe to stand erect.

CHAPTER XII

THE NIGHT ALARM

"MAKE him tell what happened."

"It's either that, or a douse in the creek for Jerry!"

"Hold on, fellows! Don't get rough, now! Sit down here and listen, only pick a place where you can roll over with laughing, for it's sure the funniest ever."

Then Jerry told them what he had seen that morning. He had kept the recital until evening, wishing to make merry around the campfire. Of course, the others knew he had seen something humorous, since he could not keep from chuckling every little while; but all their hints and entreaties had not availed to draw him out until he was good and ready.

Jerry was not disappointed with regard to seeing them laugh. Even little Jed had to join in the merriment, for he could picture the rage of his old tormentor, Farmer Dobson, as he strad-

dled that limb and looked down at the triumphant bull.

"That happened hours ago, you say?" asked Frank finally.

"Why, it was this morning, when I was out walking for my health," replied Jerry.

"Phew!" said the other, with a whistle. "What if they're still lodged up in those trees, boys?"

No one looked particularly sorry. Indeed, Bluff even laughed again.

"In that case, they must be feeling pretty stiff by now," he remarked carelessly.

"But I hardly believe the bull would stay this long at his post. The farmer knew that when he told Pet to just keep still and wait. When the beast grew hungry he would be apt to wander away in search of grass, or perhaps go for a drink. Oh, I guess they got down all right," observed Frank.

"All good things come to an end, they say. Those fellows couldn't expect to keep up at the top all the time. But I'd like to have seen it, Jerry," said Bluff.

"Think of me, the most unlucky of fellows! Another royal chance gone glimmering! My rapid-action lens would have caught both of those high-vaulters while they were in the air. Oh! what a loss to our scrapbook! Jerry, if you

would only get a little pocket camera, what glorious things you'd capture!" sighed Will.

"Excuse me, if you please. One crank in the crowd is quite enough. Frank, is it our last night in this camp?" asked the other.

"If our plans go right, it should be. Adolphus will start in the morning, and I agreed to meet him at a certain point. We can pack up after breakfast, and trail off into the mountains, taking our time," replied the leader of the outfit.

"Let's have a squint at that map again, please," observed Bluff.

The evening passed as usual. Each seemed to be busy after his fashion. Even Jed had assumed charge of the fire, and kept up a cheery blaze, while he had a heap of wood close by, ready for use during the night.

In due time the boys began to show signs of sleepiness—yawning and stretching, after the manner of those who need rest.

"Who takes the first watch to-night?" asked Frank.

"I've spoken for that. You see, I hate to be waked up, once I get to sleep. It sort of keeps me aroused, and I get to thinking of all my troubles," said Will.

"Poor chap! Too bad you have such a load to carry; but then you must expect a few good

chances to slip past your machine. As it is, I think you're doing famously, and that we'll have many a hearty laugh over the results."

"Thank you, Frank. It's sure a pleasure to know that one of my chums appreciates my humble efforts to satisfy the community, and lay up ammunition for many a dull winter evening. Go to bed, fellows. I'm *it*."

With Frank's gun in his possession, Will took up a position where he could observe things without being too conspicuous himself.

"Talk to me about that, will you?" muttered Jerry, as he watched this action on the part of his chum. "And notice how particular he is to sit where he can keep an eye on that black hole in the rocks. Don't worry, Will. We looked it over good and hard, and my word for it, there isn't another bear inside, big or little."

"Oh, I'm not bothering about that. I only thought that perhaps the mate of the one that was shot might come home, and I did so want to get a snapshot of a wild beast going into its den, with the whole camp asleep," avowed Will bluntly.

"And if the ghost should appear again, make him stand for his picture—hear!"

"Don't you worry, Jerry. My watch only ex-

tends to midnight, and then Frank comes on deck, you see."

"Wise boy, to fix it so," jeered the other as he crawled inside his tent.

Presently the camp was wrapped in silence. The fire had been so arranged that it needed very little attention from time to time. Will sat there, with the gun on one side, and his camera, ready for action, on the other. It was a question as to which he would seize upon in case of a sudden emergency; but the chances favored the snapshot arrangement, for Will would rather secure a good picture than eat the best dinner ever cooked, or shoot a prize buck.

But nothing happened, just as he had prophesied. At midnight, as he had agreed, he crept over and aroused Frank. A touch on the arm was sufficient, for the Maine boy was a light sleeper.

"All right, Will. Coming," he said in a whisper, not wishing to awaken Jerry; but from the sound of his heavy breathing it would require a cannon to do that.

Frank assumed the position vacated by his chum, but he noticed that Will carried his camera, ready for instantaneous work, into the other tent with him. Like a good soldier, Will doubt-

less believed in sleeping on his arms, so as to be able to get to work at the call of duty.

Frank wondered whether anything would happen to bring about an alarm. He settled himself down to watch with the determination to use his eyes to some advantage if that ghost happened around again.

What he had heard only whetted his curiosity, and he wished greatly to see for himself. So as the minutes glided along he remained wide-awake, and waiting for he hardly knew what.

Perhaps those Peters fellows might come around, bent upon playing one of their miserable practical jokes. He rather suspected, however, that by this time they might have concluded that they had had enough, and were headed back to town.

Well, how about Farmer Dobson and his hired man? Suppose they had managed to get away from the sentinel bull, would they, too, go back home, or continue to haunt the vicinity, spurred on by the hope of capturing the bound boy?

Frank was inclined to believe that such might be the case. He knew that Dobson seemed worried because of those welts on Jed's back, and which, if seen just now by Bluff's lawyer father, might get him into trouble. Hence, he would be apt to try still further in order to kidnap the

boy, who could then be kept secluded until all signs of his cruel treatment had passed away.

Frank had also made up his mind how he would act in case the vindictive tiller of the soil appeared in view, crawling into the camp. He even smiled a little at the prospect of holding him up a second time, and calling the others out to witness his humiliation.

Perhaps an hour had gone thus when he heard a slight sound.

"Something is moving over yonder, sure enough," he said in an undertone.

He sat perfectly still, his eyes fastened on the point where the rustling in the bushes had caught his attention.

Presently he could see the dim outline of a huge bulk.

"It's no animal, but a man or boy creeping up," he concluded, after watching this for another minute.

Then a head was cautiously raised. Frank felt glad that he had taken the pains to sit in the shadows, where he could not be easily seen. Higher arose the head.

"H'm! So it's the farmer, all right, bent on taking poor Jed home. He seems to be a very persistent old codger. Just wait, and I'll give

him the scare of his life. Bulls won't be in it," muttered the watcher.

He moved his gun up inch by inch, so that he could discharge it at the proper time. Not that he had the slightest intention of doing Dobson the least bodily injury, beyond the fright that an unexpected shot would bring.

Back of the moving figure of the farmer he could see a second form.

"His man Friday. Well, I'll include him in the performance, too," thought Frank, who was always generous by nature.

Sometimes the best-laid plans go wrong. The farmer doubtless believed he could enter the camp in this brazen way, hunt around until he found Jed, and then force the poor lad to accompany him home.

Frank, on his part, expected presently to take part in the performance, and was even figuring on how high the farmer would jump when the flash of the gun came, accompanied with the crash of the discharge.

Both were counting without their host, for it seemed that there was still another element that meant to be taken into consideration.

Just as Frank had his finger pressing on the trigger, and felt sure that it was time for him to let go, there was an unearthly shriek from the

direction of the rise to the right of the camp. Looking hastily that way, Frank saw a sight that instantly riveted his attention, and caused his nerveless finger to fall away from the trigger of his gun.

"The ghost walks! And just in time to get a large and select audience!" he exclaimed, as he saw a shining figure rear up in full view, glistening just as Will had said, with a phosphorescent glow, and one hand waving in a commanding manner, as though urging upon the trespassers the necessity of a quick departure.

Loud cries attested to the fact that Farmer Dobson and his hired man had received the shock of their lives.

CHAPTER XIII

A CHANGE OF BASE

"TALK to me about your ghastly specters, will you!" shouted a voice, as heads began to be thrust out of the several tents.

"I told you he'd come again to warn us!" chattered Bluff between rattling teeth.

"Oh! Please wait! My apparatus won't work! There, now!" And a sudden flash announced that Will had finally succeeded in his heart's dearest wish, and snapped off a picture of the terrible ghost of Oak Ridge.

The fierce illumination only added new terror to the flying feet of the two men. They could be heard crashing through the forest, howling with fear, and anger, as in the darkness they collided with sundry trees that were unseen in their blind haste.

"It's gone!" announced Jerry.

"All right. I've caught my view, just the same. Frank! Where are you?" whooped the

exultant artist, capering around in his pajamas, as he hugged his camera to his breast.

"Here," answered the sentry, appearing at that juncture.

"A pretty guard, you are, old boy, to let all those chaps creep up on the camp while we slept in unconscious innocence," said Bluff, in pretended indignation.

"Unconscious innocence is good! Tell me about that, will you? Take a good look at Bluff, fellows. He's expecting to sprout wings soon."

"I was awake, and watching all the time, boys, believe me. I saw the farmer as he crept up, followed by his man. He lifted his head and looked into the camp, no doubt trying to figure which of the two tents sheltered Jed. It was my intention to shoot into the air suddenly, and then hold him up while the rest of you piled out to surround them; but something I hadn't counted on took the chance out of my hands."

"Do you think they'll live through the experience?" asked Will.

"Meaning the two countrymen? Oh, I suppose so, if they don't dash out their brains against the trees as they run," laughed Frank.

"What do you think of the ghost now, Frank?" asked Will eagerly.

"I'm still considering," returned the other, nodding his head sagely.

"But do you still hang to your opinion that it's some person playing a part?"

"More than ever."

"And trying to scare us out of this region for some purpose or other?"

"Most undoubtedly," was Frank's immediate reply.

"And you don't think it could be that Peters crowd?" went on Bluff.

"They wouldn't be equal to a thing like this. As I said before, it is the work of a clever schemer. The object is all that puzzles me," said Frank.

"You watched the thing carry on pretty closely, I suppose?" ventured Will.

"Had my eyes glued on it every second that it stood there, waving its long arms in such a theatrical fashion. Now, I can remember reading once how a man played ghost in a haunted house, and when he was caught it turned out that he wanted to buy the place, and that was his way of depressing the price."

"Talk to me about your bulls and bears, that way of knocking down prices takes the cake!" ejaculated Jerry, greatly amused.

"Wall Street wasn't in it with that man; but

I think they sent him to jail for trespass or something," continued Frank.

"But there's no house up here, so that couldn't be his game," remarked Bluff.

"Now I remember hearing my father tell about a man who carried on this way once to scare people away from a certain locality. Come to find out afterward, he was boring for oil, and believed he had made a ten-strike," remarked Jerry.

"No oil around this section, that I ever heard of, so that explanation fails to hold good," laughed Frank. "Next!"

"It's my turn now. I never heard of anything that might cover the ground, but an idea came to me when I was thinking the old thing over, and perhaps you fellows might care to hear it," said Bluff.

"Listen to the long-winded lawyer talk! Of course we want to hear. That's what we're sitting around this blessed fire for, in our pajamas, shivering to beat the band. Out with it, you!" exclaimed Jerry.

"Original things cut no figure with some people. They want to read about all they learn, or have other persons tell them; but about this brilliant thought of mine: It's mighty evident that whoever the ghost is, he wants to be left alone. Now what kind of people dislike to have stran-

gers come prowling around their secrets? Why, down in Kentucky and Tennessee it would be moonshiners. Up in the Maine forests, like as not timber-grabbers. Here it might be counterfeiters."

"Hear! hear! Bluff has spoken the last word!" exclaimed Jerry excitedly.

"What do you think about it, Frank?"

Will, as he put the question, turned toward the one upon whom the rest were accustomed to depend to settle all disputes.

"I don't know. The suggestion Bluff made might turn out to be the true solution of the mystery. At any rate, it's barely possible, and worth remembering. Later on we may be able to see light in this dark puddle, and then know how near he came to hitting the bullseye," he replied thoughtfully.

To him it appeared a serious matter, and one that should not be treated with too much levity.

"Well, I'm sleepy again, in spite of all this excitement, and as my turn comes last, I'm going to turn in. A bully old blanket feels good to me, fellows," saying which, Jerry crawled under the khaki-colored canvas.

The others followed suit. It would do no good to continue the conversation at such an unseason-

able hour. All that was to be said could hold over until breakfast time, when they would be able to look at matters in a different light.

Frank sat out his watch, and then put Bluff on the job. In turn he roused Jerry, who stood it out until the dawn began to light up the east, when he started the fire into new life, put the coffee on to boil, with cold water, as was their wont, and busied himself in doing various things until the rest should appear.

Jed was the first to creep out and go down to the stream for a wash. It might be noticed that the lad seemed unusually timid this morning. Whether this sprang from his fear of the gruff farmer, or the wonderful spectacle he had seen on the preceding night, Jerry could not say.

Over the breakfast they made merry in connection with the adventures that had come their way since making camp.

"Everybody work!" called out Frank finally, as he started in to pack up.

They all seemed delighted at the prospect of a change of base, all but poor old Peter, who wheezed worse than ever as he found himself hitched up to that big load, and the fine prospect of a sturdy pull, uphill, ahead of him.

"I'm just hungry for a sight of the water," announced Bluff.

"Ditto here. Camp don't seem just the same away from it," said Jerry.

"And the views one gets with a lake for a background! Nothing can compare with them," observed the photographic fiend, sighing.

"Well, I hope none of us will be disappointed with Lake Surprise, that's all," remarked Frank, as he lashed the canvas of his tent in a bundle and placed it carefully in the wagon.

They were off by nine o'clock.

"Good-by to the old camp! Hurrah for the new one!" sang out Bluff, as he turned to wave a pathetic hand toward the scene of their late location.

"Did you take some of the bear meat along with the hide?" asked Will.

"All we want, I guess. I forgot to bring a file, and my teeth need attention before I tackle any more of that pemmican," groaned Jerry.

"Wait and see. The next time I expect to boil a chunk, and serve it that way, as a bear stew. If I have any choice, I prefer a cub, myself; but you fellows know that in this case it was a question whether we got the bear or he got us; and since circumstances compelled me to shoot——"

"Keep some of that hot air for to-night, when

you'll need it to blow up your old rubber bag," called Jerry derisively.

"——why," went on Bluff composedly, paying no attention to the interruption, "it would be a sin to waste all that good wholesome meat. Hence these tears on the part of our envious friend."

"Envious friend is good—for you!" muttered Jerry; but all the same, he stopped trying to plague the other, as though the shaft might have gone home.

Soon they were climbing the hills that stretched along the foot of the mountain range proper. Old Peter was put to it, at times, to draw the load, and more than once Frank called to his comrades to put their husky young shoulders to the wheels in order to help out.

Will wandered on as they descended the other slope, with the mountains before them. He carried his beloved camera, of course, and no doubt hoped to come across some charming picture that would add to the pleasure of the boys when the season of cold and snow was upon them.

In this way he managed to get quite some distance ahead, for the wagon was halted while Frank rebuilt the load, in danger of falling off with the sharp descent.

Down at the bottom of the valley that lay be-

tween Oak Ridge and the Sunset Mountains proper, Will came to a stream. It was a broad but shallow one, and believing he could easily wade across, he pulled his shoes off, tied them to his belt, and then turning his trousers up, started in.

It had a soft, sandy bottom that felt very pleasing to his feet. Half-way over Will stopped to look about him.

"Say, now, that would make a dandy picture, with the water lazily swirling downstream, and the trees hanging over. I've a good notion to try it," he said.

Standing there, he set to work. Perhaps he was more than usually particular to get things just as he wanted them. Sometimes one can overdo this good trait, and Will came to that conclusion when, upon attempting to move on, he found to his surprise that his feet seemed locked, as in a vise.

When he tried to lift one, his entire weight falling upon the other seemed to push that one down several inches deeper.

"What does this mean? Why, the water is already up to my trousers! I guess I'll have to hitch them up higher, or get wet."

He was not at all excited, as yet, for the danger that menaced him had not come into his mind.

He managed to accomplish the little task which he had set out to do, but by that time he was in up to his knees, and apparently still gradually going down, slowly but surely.

Now he could hardly move either foot, and as for pulling one of them out of the sucking sand, it seemed utterly impossible.

Will looked up. There was a stout limb of a tree just above him. If he could only get hold of that he might manage to draw himself out. Vainly did he stretch up his hands, for they fell short fully a dozen inches of touching the very nearest twigs of that friendly limb.

For the first time a cold chill began to chase up and down his spinal column.

"What if the boys fail to come along for half an hour! At this rate I'd be completely out of sight, and they'd never know what had become of me!" he exclaimed, in new horror.

The surface of the stream looked so very innocent, no one would ever suspect that such a terrible trap lay just beneath the slowly running water.

"It's what they call quicksand—that's what!" he ejaculated, as he looked down with distended eyes, and saw that line of water gradually rising above his knees—slowly and almost imperceptibly, but as surely as that the sun shone overhead.

Then Will grew frightened.

"Help! help! Frank! Jerry! Come quick!" he shouted at the top of his voice; but only the echoes seemed to come back to taunt him.

CHAPTER XIV

FIGHTING THE QUICKSAND

"LISTEN! What was that?"

"Sounded to me like Will shouting," said Frank quickly, as he tied the last knot in the holding rope that was bound around the wagon-load of camp material.

"Sounds like he was only trying to awaken the echoes," ventured Bluff.

"They do come back clear enough. I hope nothing is wrong with him."

"Oh, hardly, Frank. What could happen in broad daylight? Ghosts don't come out of their holes then, and we all agreed that the chances were the farmer, as well as that ugly Peters crowd, must have hiked back to town. Will's all right," observed Jerry, coolly.

"There he goes again. I don't like the sound of his voice, and it seems to me that he is calling us by name. Listen once more. Wasn't that word 'help'?"

"It sure sounded like it," declared Bluff, looking with startled eyes at his two chums.

"Come on, Bluff, with me. Jerry, you stay by the wagon, and keep your eyes on the lookout all the time. Nobody can say what we might run up against in these Sunset Mountains. If there are ghosts, there may be other things."

"All right, I'll stay," replied Jerry, though the disappointed look on his face told plainly enough that he would much rather accompany them.

Frank and Bluff ran down the rough road at a fast clip. The nearer they came to the bottom the louder grew the cries.

"No mistake, now, Bluff. He's calling for help," declared Frank, quickening his pace even more.

"Oh! I wonder what's happened. Perhaps he fell and broke a leg," suggested Bluff.

"I hope not. That would be hard for poor Will, and break up our outing entirely," returned the other.

"Look! There he is, Frank!"

"That looks serious!" exclaimed the boy from Maine.

"What's he standing in the middle of that dinky little stream for, up to his waist in water? Why, he's getting all wet!"

Frank simply turned his head and shouted over his shoulder the one word:

"Quicksand!"

"Good gracious! Is that so?" gasped Bluff, as he ran, panting, after his chum.

In another minute the two stood on the bank.

"Oh! I'm so glad you came," said poor Will, "for I'm going down awful fast!"

Bluff was for dropping his gun and rushing out in the water to the assistance of his imperilled chum. It did his heart credit, this impulsiveness, but just then, no doubt, it was well that he had a comrade near by possessed of a cooler head, or there might soon have been a pair of them in the quicksand.

"Stop! None of that, Bluff!" said Frank, clutching him by the arm.

"But, look! The poor fellow will be drowned if we don't help him mighty fast!" expostulated the rash boy, struggling to break away.

"And if you go in there we'll only have to drag out both of you, that's all. Now suppose you leave the thing to me. I've seen a man taken out of the quicksand before," declared Frank calmly.

He had taken in the whole situation in that one glance, and knew just what danger there was, as well as how he should go about the rescue.

"All right, Frank, only please be quick. Tell me what to do right now."

"Run back to the wagon and bring that spare rope we got from those Peters fellows. I said at the time it might come in handy, and this is the occasion. Be as fast as you can, Bluff."

"But you——"

"I'll be doing something right here. Go!"

When Frank spoke that way he meant to be obeyed. Bluff turned in his tracks and started back up the grade, running as if for a wager.

"Please do something, Frank, to keep me from slipping down any farther. I'm going faster, now, I think. It makes me feel cold with the awful chance of being sucked underneath the water," called Will just then.

"It's all right, pard. Keep up your pluck, and we'll yank you out of there in a jiffy. While Bluff is gone for that rope watch what I'm going to do."

He ran to the base of the tree that overhung the stream just there, and climbed into its branches like a monkey. Then he made his way out on the limb that Will had so vainly tried to reach, until in a few seconds he was directly over his imperilled chum.

"Oh, I see now, Frank! It's a bully idea, all



"TAKE HOLD OF THIS, THEN BEAR YOURSELF UP."—Page 125.
The Outdoor Chums in the Forest.

right!" cried the boy in the sand, the anxious look beginning to leave his face.

Frank hung on the limb and reached down his hand. He could just touch that of the lad below.

"I can't take hold! Oh! what shall I do, Frank? You can't reach me, and before the others come I may go under!" Will called, in new terror.

"I'm not trying to take your hand. What I want is for you to hand me up your camera, so as to have both hands free. There, that's it."

He hung the precious black box upon a branch of the tree.

Will, looking up piteously, saw him take off his coat. Then Frank slipped it down so that the sleeves dangled above the other's head.

"Take hold of those, one in each hand. Then bear yourself up as best you can by means of the coat, while I brace myself up here," he said.

Will struggled a bit.

"But I don't seem able to recover an inch, Frank!" he exclaimed.

"I don't expect you to. Few men could pull themselves out of the clutch of a quicksand bed after getting in as deep as you are. All I want is to keep you from going down any deeper until they come with the rope."

"Oh! I see now. It's a good idea. And then what?" asked Will, cheering up.

"We'll pass it over the limb here, get you to slip the noose under your arms, and on shore all of us pull like fun. If that doesn't move you, then we can hitch old Peter to the rope, and you've just got to come!"

Shouts announced the appearance of the others. Bluff and Jerry were running, the former carrying the needed rope, while in the rear Jed could be heard urging the horse at a rapid rate down the incline.

Under Frank's direction, the rope was made with a noose at the end. Then Bluff crept out and handed it to Frank, relieving him of the suspended coat. Will let go just long enough to place the noose under his arms, though he exclaimed that he had sunk six inches immediately.

Jerry now pulled at the other end of the rope, to hold it taut, while the others were scrambling ashore.

"Now!" cried Frank, "a good pull, a long pull, and a pull together! Yo heave-o!"

Will uttered a cry.

"I don't seem to move a bit!" he exclaimed.

Again and again the three boys pulled. Even Jed, who had come up, took hold. They could not get the proper grip, it seemed, for the im-

prisoned lad still stuck there, groaning with pain and mental torture mingled.

"You haven't gone down any further, at any rate, Will. I suppose we'll have to ask Peter to help us out," sang out Frank cheerily, for he saw that his chum was rapidly becoming very despondent again.

Accordingly, Peter was fastened to the end of the line.

"Wait just five seconds before you say the word!" cried Will.

"What's the matter?" asked Frank, a little alarmed.

"Give Bluff a chance. He's got the camera back there, and is trying for a focus. It ought to be a great picture, fellows!" answered the sinking boy.

"Talk to me about grit! Did you ever hear the equal of that? He's a camera crank of the first water, all right!" exclaimed Jerry.

"And this is the water. Hurry up, Bluff! Snap her off! I'm tired of staying here!"

"I've got it. Now start the circus, Frank!" cried Bluff, with a grin, as though he quite enjoyed turning the tables on the ardent photographer for once.

So the horse was urged to start moving. Frank tried to ease the jerk as much as he was able, but

all the same, poor Will cried out that he felt as if he were being drawn in two.

"But I moved then! Keep going, now that you've started, boys! Oh! sure enough, I'm coming up! Faster, now! Hurrah! I'm free from that horrible mire!" he continued to shout, as he dangled there with his feet in the water and his head almost touching the friendly limb.

"Try and climb up. Here, Jerry is coming out to help you, Will!" called Frank.

With the assistance of his chum, Will managed to straddle the limb. Then, after he had rested a little while, he crept along until at last he jumped to the ground, to be received with hearty handshakes by all the others.

"But that was a terribly close shave, all right," he said, as Jerry scraped the sand and mud from his legs. "Whatever would you have done if it hadn't been for that bully old tree, Frank?"

"I don't know, exactly, but I'd have found some way to pull you out," returned the other; and those boys, who knew what he was equal to in an emergency, felt positive that he would have proved the victor, no matter what the conditions.

CHAPTER XV

JERRY MAKES A GUESS

"FRANK, what about the other wagon?" asked Will.

"Well, what about it?"

"Suppose it got caught the same way I did, and the horses were dragged down?"

"But it won't, all right, depend on that. In the first place, you didn't try to cross at the regular ford, but wandered downstream a bit, you see. Then, again, I mean to leave a notice fastened to a stick right here in the road, warning Adolphus against turning aside. I've tested the ford, and it's safe," was Frank's reply.

The wagon was taken over without any accident. Then they started afresh for the upper regions, where that jewel of a lake nestled in the heart of the mountains, awaiting their coming.

"It's a much longer journey than I thought," admitted Frank, an hour later, as, having climbed

the ascent, they were winding in and out among the heavy forest.

"And a harder pull than I dreamed of. Peter is the boss horse, for all his wheezing and grunting," declared Bluff.

"I'll never forget what he did for me!" exclaimed Will, who had been feeding the old animal on lumps of sugar at intervals for the last hour, until Frank forbade him to keep it up longer, lest he founder the beast with kindness.

"Well, that ought to pay us for all we've endured!" cried Jerry, pointing.

"It's sure-enough Surprise Lake!" cried the others in chorus, for they had burst out of the woods at a point that allowed the first glimpse of the beautiful sheet of water for which they were headed.

Presently they reached the bank, and Frank, with the instinct of a true sportsman, picked out the ideal spot for the tents to go up.

First they had a bite to eat, for the hour was long past their customary lunch time, and all of them owned to being hungry. Will, in particular, declared he could eat even cold bear meat, if there was any handy. Though somewhat sore around his waist and arms, he said he felt all right.

Then the tents went up, and the place assumed the appearance of a genuine camp.

"When the canoes are floating on that lovely lake it will look like fairyland!" declared Frank enthusiastically.

"I don't see any sign of a living being," remarked Bluff.

"Nor do I believe any one is camping up here right now. We've got the whole lake to ourselves, fellows," observed Will.

The afternoon passed slowly. They were anxiously waiting to hear the cheery voice of old Adolphus in the distance, talking to his horses to encourage them.

"What are you so serious about, Frank?" asked Jerry, dropping down beside the other on the soft turf.

Frank looked cautiously around to see that the others were engaged elsewhere.

"I was going to take you into it, Jerry, when a chance came, but thought that just now it might be well not to tell all the others. Listen, then. You remember that some time ago we were talking over that dog matter, when you spoke of the bloodhounds Colonel Halpin brought up from the South, and which were borrowed by the warden to chase the two escaped prisoners?"

"Why, yes, I remember that," answered the

other, looking surprised and curious, as well he might.

"One man was recaptured through the aid of the dogs," went on Frank.

"That's so. You and I heard different stories about how it happened the other poor chap got away. One account said he took to the water, while another spoke of him using red pepper to fuddle the scent of the hounds."

"All right, Jerry. The main point is that he got away, isn't it?"

"It sure is; and I give him credit for some smartness. Any man who can outwit that head warden of the penitentiary, and backed up by a couple of trained hounds, at that, is no slouch, in my opinion."

"Well, it happened that in a paper we had wrapped around some of our things I found an account of that escape. It was interesting to me," said Frank.

"Why?" asked Jerry eagerly.

"For one thing, because it was a thrilling story. Another thing lay in the fact that all sorts of strange possibilities flashed before my mind, for, Jerry, the name of the escaped convict was familiar to me, and will be to you."

Frank gave another hasty look around. Then taking out a piece of paper, evidently torn from

an old news sheet, he held it out so that the other could see where he had drawn a heavy black ring with his lead pencil.

"Thaddeus Lasher!"

As Jerry muttered that name his eyes sought those of his chum.

"Whew!" he whistled in an expressive way.

"It looks serious for Andy, don't you think?" asked Frank.

"It does now, for a fact. Do you think this can be his dad?" asked the other.

"Don't know; either that, or an uncle, for the account mentions that he is a man about fifty years of age. He seems to have been imprisoned a good long time back for the crime of robbery. There was a little doubt about it at the time, and he was sentenced on purely circumstantial evidence. Some people even thought he might be innocent," went on Frank.

"And all these years he has lain in the penitentiary, forgotten by every one but his family; that's pretty tough," muttered sympathetic Jerry.

"How long have you known Andy?"

"He and his mother came to Centerville about five years back. Nobody ever knew anything about the family. I always supposed his father was dead," replied Jerry thoughtfully.

"Well, it looks as though this escaped convict,

who still had years to serve, might be his father. Some cruel people would say that that is why Andy has always been a wild, tough boy; but I think that came from other reasons. But, Jerry, do you remember that we couldn't for our lives guess what was taking Andy up in this region?"

"Yes. He never peeped a word about it, for a fact!"

"And he carried a bag. We supposed he had clothes in that, but now I'm of the opinion that it might have been food," said Frank.

"For his hiding father? Frank, it takes you to see through these mysteries. Ten to one, you solve the ghost racket before we go back."

"Don't be too sure. I may slip up on that; but I may as well hint, even now, that I've got a sort of vague idea in connection with an explanation there. Later on I'm going to try and prove it out. But say nothing to the others until I give you permission."

"Of course not. It's your say in the matter. But what can Andy be thinking of? Perhaps he means to help smuggle his dad out of the States, into Canada, when the coast is clear. Anyhow, I can't help feeling sorry for the fellow. It shows that he has something good in him, just as I always said."

"That's so, Jerry. Any fellow who stands up for his father can't be all bad."

"All right, Frank. Glad to hear you say so. What do you want to ask me?"

"Have you any idea about the matter? Can you give a guess what the escaped convict would be doing up here all this time?"

"What date is that paper, Frank?"

"Some three months back. The man has been loose all that time."

"But perhaps not up here. He may have gone far away, and only come back to this neighborhood recently, for some reason," ventured Jerry.

"That's what I wanted to hear from you. I know that you have inherited a little of the clear reasoning power that has made your father the successful banker he is. Apply it to this case, now. Supposing Thaddeus Lasher did go away, and has recently come back here, what brings him? What does he mean to do here?"

"H'm! Evidently he found means to communicate with his family," mused Jerry.

"Yes; if, as we believe, Andy had provisions in that stout grip which he was taking up to his father, to tide him over. But the clamor has long since died out, Jerry. Then why doesn't this escaped convict get away for good?"

Jerry looked at him keenly.

"I can see that you've got something on your mind, Frank," he said.

"I admit it."

"Something connected with this affair and the coming of Andy with the grub his mother has sent. Wait a minute till I put two and two together, and perhaps I can catch a glimpse of the same thing that has struck you."

Frank watched him curiously.

Presently Jerry looked up and grinned.

"You've hit something, I see," remarked his chum.

"I reckon I have, pard. It may sound foolish, but all the same, as my dad would say, it seems like a logical sequence to me," he ventured.

"You think, then, there is some connection between this hiding of Thaddeus Lasher in the hills and something that has puzzled us? Suppose you say plainly just what you believe. What do you lay at his door, Jerry?"

Jerry raised his heavy eyebrows and uttered a couple of words that brought a smile to the face of his companion and a quick nod of the head.

"The ghost!"

CHAPTER XVI

A TIME FOR QUICK ACTION

"WHAT would he want to play ghost for, Frank?" asked Jerry presently.

"Give it up. There might be one of a dozen reasons. You know the old story about Columbus and the egg, and how easy it seemed to stand it on end after being shown? Well, this is something the same. I've no doubt that after we learn all about the matter, if we ever do, all of us will say, 'how easy,' just as those Spanish grantees did at the court of Philip."

"Mention one or two reasons, then, just to push me along," urged Jerry.

"Well, perhaps he may fear that a search will be made up here for him, and wants to frighten people away. I forgot to tell you that the account says Thaddeus Lasher was once an actor of no mean merit," remarked Frank.

"Say, now, that kind of fits in real well, don't it? Who but an actor would ever think of play-

ing ghost up here in this lonely region? But somehow I seem to feel that there must be a deeper reason than that for it all."

"I do, too, Jerry; but the truth is, I don't seem able to get hold of it. All the while I feel as if it might be just there beyond my reach, and I keep stretching out my hands without finding a grip. But it'll come, sooner or later."

"Yes; they say everything does to the one who waits long enough. What if we run across Andy again?" queried Jerry.

"All right. We'll treat him just as though we never suspected a thing."

"Then you won't think of putting him on the rack?"

"Certainly not. What business is it of ours what he is doing up here? We can guess all we like, but if that convict is hiding here for any reason, let the authorities catch him. I'd hate to think that I'd been the means of sending any poor wretch back to such a life. And remember, he may have been innocent, after all, so that all these years he was suffering for something he never did."

"Frank, I guess you're right; you nearly always are. Look at Bluff swimming like a duck out there! I heard him say the water was colder than our lake."

"I should think it would be. This mountain lake is fed by springs, and even in the dog days I imagine it would feel delightfully cool for swimming. I hope Bluff doesn't go out too far. Sometimes a fellow is apt to catch a cramp when plunging into one of these cold bodies of water."

"But he didn't plunge in. I watched him, and he just waded out, Frank."

"So much the worse, then, for in that way one drives the warm blood up from the extremities suddenly, and there is always more danger of cramps. Always take a header into the water first. It's the safest way. Hi, Bluff!" he called, elevating his voice.

"Hello! What do you want, Frank?" asked the swimmer, who was spurting water out some twenty yards from the shore, and seemingly enjoying himself hugely.

"I wouldn't go out any further. I don't believe it's safe," called Frank.

"Oh, bosh! There isn't any ghost out here. I'll guarantee to drown the first one that bobs up. Give you my word on it."

He vanished under the water, and presently came up again, snorting and puffing.

"How deep?" demanded Will, who was also watching, as if in doubt whether to go in or not.

"Ten feet or so out here. Looks like it might be a hundred out in the middle. Gee! but it's cold, fellows! Like you were taking a turn in an ice bath."

"Better come in closer," advised Frank uneasily.

"Will soon," grunted Bluff, who could be stubborn when he liked.

So Frank sat down again, though occasionally, as he and Jerry talked on, he kept casting glances out toward the spot where the venturesome bather was disporting himself like some aquatic animal.

"An idea came to me just now," remarked Jerry, who could not get his mind off the subject that had been holding their attention at the time Frank spoke to Bluff.

"Suppose you pass it along, then?" smiled his chum.

"There may be something up in these mountains that Thaddeus Lasher wants, and he doesn't feel like allowing others to get in on the discovery."

Frank shook his head, as he said:

"Possible, but hardly probable. Put all such notions as a discovery of gold in the rocks or sand out of your head. There isn't any formation to make that even a gambler's chance; and

I think the same would apply as to an oil discovery. Men once looked this field over carefully, and pronounced against any hope of that."

"But you have an idea, you said?" suggested Jerry insinuatingly.

"I'm not going to mention that one just yet. But I don't mind telling you what came into my mind at first, as the most probable thing," replied Frank.

"I suppose I'll have to be satisfied with that, then," grumbled Jerry.

"It isn't at all to the credit of either Thaddeus Lasher or Andy, and let me say right here that I take very little stock in it now."

"But tell me, anyhow, Frank," persisted Jerry.

"Supposing that the escaped convict felt that everybody's hand was raised against him, and that from this time on he must fight the world as a crooked man? In such a case he would be apt to feel that since he had the name he might as well have the game."

"I'm following you, and I must say you put the case just as well as Bluff could do, with all his dad's lawyer blood backing him up. Go on, Frank. This thing is mighty interesting to me, I tell you."

"Supposing the hunted man did feel that way, he might be tempted to start up in some unlaw-

ful business here in the quiet of the hills back of Oak Ridge. The only thing that occurs to me would, of course, be counterfeiting," said Frank.

"Had he been accused of that before?"

"Oh, no; or he would have been punished by the United States authorities rather than those of the State. But you know men in prison learn many bad things they never knew before going there. Somehow they seem eager to learn what every old lawbreaker has to tell, in secret. I've been told that, anyway, and believe it. So Thaddeus Lasher might have learned about counterfeiting while in prison."

"Follow up that idea still further, Frank. I've been reading the 'Count of Monte Cristo,' by Dumas, lately, and that gives me an idea. Perhaps Thaddeus found a chance to do something for one of the prisoners while there. That rascal, in return, may have told him where he had buried his tools for making money, and up here in these hills, too!" exclaimed Jerry eagerly.

Frank laughed at the conceit.

"Say, you are a great fellow for leaping to conclusions, and yet, when you come to examine the thing closer, it doesn't seem so very far-fetched, either. Such a thing has happened before Dumas ever wrote his immortal story, and

I suppose it will come about a good many more times," he remarked.

"All right. If, in the end, it proves to be something like that, don't forget, will you, Frank, that I guessed it. Ordinarily, I'm not a very good hand at solving riddles, and it would about tickle me to death if by chance I had hit on the answer to the thing that's bothering us now."

"I'll give you all the credit, my boy, depend on that," laughed Frank.

"But I hope it won't turn out to be anything nearly so serious as that," continued Jerry, loyal to his belief in Andy's reformation.

"Ditto. After all, there's a good chance that it may be something that will surprise us. But enough of that for the present, Jerry. Let's turn to what concerns us more closely. There's Jed keeping up a fine fire, and Bluff has his stew of bear meat cooking nicely while he flounders in the water. If only Adolphus would show up now we'd feel prime."

"I thought I heard a distant shout just then, but it may have been only the crows scolding over there in that dead tree. Hark! There it came again!"

"Yes, I caught it that time. Adolphus is coming, all right. I'd know his whoop among a thousand. He can never drive, it seems, without talk-

ing to his horses; and when he wants them to put on an extra spurt he shouts. That's him, sure," declared Frank, rising to his feet.

"Look at Bluff! How queer he is acting, Frank!"

Frank was startled by these words. He whirled around, all the smile gone from his face, for he had been half expecting something of this sort for quite some little time.

Bluff was indeed acting queerly. He seemed to be in distress, and yet his very obstinacy kept him from calling out for help. He was trying to swim, and at the same time kept doubling up, as though in agony. At such times his head would bob under the water for a second or two.

"He's got a cramp!" cried Frank, instantly recognizing the signs.

"And we have no boat!" exclaimed Jerry, wringing his hands.

Frank was already hurling off some of his clothes. His shoes flew, one to the right and the other to the left, as though torn from his feet.

"What can we do, Frank?" cried Will, standing there.

"Form a chain, and wade in as far as you can stand; no further. Leave the rest to me," Frank answered.

Even as he was saying the last word he ran straight for the bank of the lake. The other boys, watching in stunned surprise, saw him give one leap from the shore, strike the water, and vanish from view.

"Quick, fellows! We must do what he said!" cried Jerry, tearing off his shoes and wading in, without thinking of removing his clothes.

CHAPTER XVII

THE NEWS ADOLPHUS BROUGHT

WHEN Frank reappeared on the surface he was a third of the way out to where his chum was struggling so desperately in the water.

With powerful strokes he swam swiftly onward. Bluff saw him coming, and stretched out his hands appealingly, as though he realized now the peril he was in.

"Help me—Frank—cramp got me!" he gurgled.

Then he went under again, despite his struggles. Frank pushed on, his eyes on the lookout for the upcoming of the drowning lad. He seemed to know that Bluff had not yet lost every atom of his vitality, and was capable of another tussle at least.

When Bluff came fighting to the surface Frank was there. He avoided the frenzied clutch of the other, knowing how fatal such a thing would be. The only hope of saving Bluff was to catch

him from behind. Then, if there was danger of his trying to wrap his arms about his would-be rescuer, even more desperate tactics must be employed to stop such a move, and in some cases it seems necessary to strike the drowning person over the head to make him desist.

Of course, Bluff did not know what he was doing now. He had reached that point where he would clutch frantically at a straw, in the hope that it would bear him up. To him, Frank was only as much as a plank would have been.

Watching his opportunity, ere the boy could sink again Frank managed to get a firm grip on the back of his neck. The fact that Bluff wore his hair rather long aided him in this maneuver, he afterward confessed.

Then he worked hard to swim toward the shore, towing Bluff along. It was a difficult task to keep the face of the other above the surface and at the same time fight off his hands when he sought to clutch the swimmer's arms. Such a catastrophe would have possibly been the means of a double tragedy.

Meanwhile, the rest of the party had waded in, holding to each other's hands. Even Jed was at the end of the chain, on the side nearest the shore, but just as eager to lend a hand toward the rescue of the drowning lad as any of the others.

Bluff had been kind to the bound boy, and the heart of the waif was full of gratitude toward these friends who had been suddenly raised up for him.

Foot by foot Frank worked his way in, while Jerry held out an eager hand to assist when he came within reach.

Frank remained perfectly cool through it all. It was marvelous how this boy seemed to know just what should be done in any emergency, and how to do it. Bluff did not struggle to get at him so much now. This was not because he knew better; the truth was, he had become partially unconscious.

Still Frank did not lose hope, for he knew matters had not gone so far but what the other could be readily resuscitated by the ordinary means.

Now he reached the outstretched hand of Jerry, who had insisted upon being at the outer end of the chain, he having an inch or so more stature than Will. Then they all got safely to shore, and Frank laid Bluff down on the ground.

"Turn him over, the first thing, with his head down the bank. Draw his arms back and forth with a regular motion, as if he were breathing; and don't be frightened, any of you. He will be

all right in a jiffy. I've seen men brought back when they had sunk for the last time, and the rescuer had to dive twice before he got his man. There! You see!" For Bluff had actually sighed.

In five minutes he was looking up at them and trying to smile, although it was a mighty pitiful attempt. In twice that time they had him by the fire, and two were rubbing him vigorously with coarse towels, under Frank's directions.

"I'm all right, fellows," said Bluff, with a look of gratitude in his eyes, as he squeezed Frank's hand.

"Only for Frank, here, just think where you'd be right now," said Will in an awed tone, looking out on the water and shuddering.

"Here, none of that now! Won't allow it! Get up a brisk circulation, and then he must dress. The balance of you fellows had better be thinking of drying yourselves somewhat. I can see you are pretty wet," laughed Frank.

"And for once, Will didn't think of getting his camera!" said Bluff whimsically.

"Talk to me about that, will you! It would have been just like him to have sung out to Frank to please wait there a minute while he ran up on the bank and got a focus on the two," sang out Jerry.

Will gave him a reproachful look.

"I'll admit that I'm keen on getting a picture nearly every time, but really I hope I'm not quite so much of a heathen as all that," he said.

"What's the racket I hear?" asked Bluff just then.

"That is old Adolphus coming along the road, and whooping at his horses to beat the band!" exclaimed Jerry exultantly.

He thought a great deal of Bluff, and his heart swelled with gratitude over the recent rescue of the imperilled swimmer. Nor was Jerry in the least jealous because it had fallen to Frank to save their mutual chum. Jerry could be generous, and even broad, in his way of looking at things.

Closer came the shouts. Then around the bend appeared a strange moving spectacle, with the three canoes piled up, and secured on the wagon that was pulled by the two stout horses.

The boys broke out into loud cheers. It seemed almost like a miracle to see the beloved mosquito craft away up here in the Sunset Mountains.

No sooner had the wagon arrived than they were as busy as beavers. The canoes that had only a few hours back been calmly reposing on the waters of Camalot Lake were quickly wedded to those of Lake Surprise.

"Say, don't they look fine, though? Did you

ever see a prettier picture than our camp, right now, with the forest for a background, the lake in front, and those dandy little craft bobbing up and down like corks? Me for a paddle!"

So saying, Jerry leaped into one of the single canoes and went swiftly up the lake, followed by Will in the other. Bluff looked after them wishfully.

"Not to-night, I guess. You must be feeling a little weak after all your labor out there, old chap," said Frank, smiling.

Bluff caught his hand again and squeezed it. Though he said not a word just then, it was evident that his heart was full.

"And another thing bothers me," he remarked presently, as humor followed close on the heels of tragedy. "I won't be in decent condition to match Jerry to-night, and he's already one inning ahead on lung capacity."

"Well, for this night, then, we'll declare the match off. Some of the rest of us will take a turn at blowing up those rubber mattresses. Save yourself for to-morrow," said Frank, glad to know that Bluff could put his recent experience out of his mind, for he had heard of cases where it had proved a haunting fear for a long time, men even waking out of a sound sleep with loud

cries, as they imagined they were once more going through all the horrors of drowning.

Will soon came back with the canoe, while Jerry kept on further, desirous of exploring the shores of the lake while about it.

"I saw a likely-looking rocky glen a short distance above where we came in, and as the sun is just right for a good picture of it, I think I'll meander over that way and have a look in," he remarked.

Saying which, he picked up his camera and sauntered off. Everybody being busily engaged, they paid little attention to him. Adolphus was putting out his horses near where good old Peter was cropping the grass, being held by a long rope to keep him from straying away.

"Dis 'pears tuh be a mighty fine place up hyar, sah," the old darky was saying to Frank, who worked near him, doing something connected with the coming supper.

"We think so, Adolphus, and expect to enjoy our stay immensely. Glad you can keep us company. You say that they're all well at home? Seems as though we had been away for a couple of weeks, instead of a few days," Frank went on.

"Everybody well, I done reckons, Mars Frank, sah. Libely times along dis yer Oak Ridge, dey

sez, wat wid dat ghostses, an' now de sheriff he am on de track ob a man he wants tuh git mighty bad, him an' his possum."

Frank knew that what old Adolphus meant to say was "posse," and at another time he might have laughed at the comical blunder, for evidently "all possums looked alike" to Adolphus. Just then, however, Frank was startled by what he had heard.

"Hunting for a man, did you say, Adolphus," he asked quickly.

"Yes, sah. An' it are a bad man that 'scaped from de jail sum time ergo. Dey done kotched one, but dis critter he erludes 'em like er fox. But dey got er clue, dey sez, an' dey turned out 'bout two mile back, leabin' me de hull road," the colored man chattered on, never dreaming that Frank was deeply interested in what he was saying.

Frank's thoughts flew like lightning. Then, after all, what he and Jerry had suspected bade fair to prove true—the escaped convict was hiding in Sunset Mountains, and Andy had come up to join him, for some strange purpose or other.

It began to look as though the chains might be tightening around Thaddeus Lasher, and that before long he would find himself once more in the clutches of the law.

"There's Will shouting again, I declare! Wonder what is up now? He can't be trusted to go off by himself alone any more. You don't think he's in another quicksand, do you, Frank?" exclaimed Bluff just then.

"No. This time he doesn't call for help, but wants us to come up there and see something strange. Will you come along, Bluff? I wonder what he has found?"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DEN OF VIPERS

"THIS way, fellows!" came a voice.

"There he is, over yonder," said Bluff, pointing.

"He seems to be interested in something down in a hole. Wonder if it could be another bear's den?" laughed Frank.

"What ails you, Will?" demanded Bluff, as he and his comrade drew near.

"I'm in a peck of trouble again, that's what," replied the other.

"No quicksand this time, eh? And I see no sign of a bear. What's happened? Where is your camera?" asked Frank, quickly noting the fact that Will failed to have the little black box, as usual, in his hand.

"That's just what's the matter with me. The blessed things have taken possession, and I don't dare go near. Ugh! I always hated 'em like poison!"

Frank stepped closer to where he could look

down into the gully which seemed to be holding the attention of his chum.

"Snakes!" he exclaimed.

"Wow! Look at the bunch, will you? They seem to think there's something mighty good in that same black box of yours, Will. See how they keep twisting around it, going and coming. Say, there are more of the vipers! Bless my soul, if they ain't peeking out of every crack in the place, dozens and dozens of 'em!" cried Bluff, aghast.

"Do you mean to say you were down there?" demanded Frank.

"Why, yes, and there wasn't one in sight then. I meant to cross over so as to get a view of the glen with the sun at my back. I laid down the camera to fasten my belt, where it had slipped. Just then I saw several of the nasty things creeping up close by me," and Will shivered.

"I bet you cut and run, forgetting all about your camera," declared Bluff.

"Well, now, Mr. Smarty, I did just that same thing. Who wouldn't? You know that I'd sooner face seven wildcats than one snake. They always give me the creeps. But I want my camera, snakes or no snakes," said Will.

"How are you intending to get it?" observed the unsympathetic Bluff.

"If I'd known that, do you suppose I'd have called you up to help? I want advice, that's what," snapped Will.

"Well," remarked Frank soberly, "it looks to me as if you'd had another narrow escape, Will. Some of those snakes may be of a poisonous variety. Seems to me I can see rattlers among them, or copperheads, at least. What if one of them had struck you in the hand?"

"Ugh! Please don't mention it, Frank! I'll have the cold shivers now, for sure. If I wake the camp to-night with a wild whoop, don't blame me. What with quicksands and poisonous snakes I ought to be excused for any racket," he declared.

"Why, hang it, if the place ain't fairly alive with the crawling critters! Frank, you wouldn't think of going down there to get that box, I hope?" demanded Bluff, as the other commenced to make a move.

"It would have to be something ten times as valuable as that to tempt me," was the reply, "but all the same, we must find a way to rescue Will's camera. Without it how can he take any more pictures of our wonderful deeds? Let's see, once to-day I've used the limb of a tree to good advantage. Perhaps it can be made to play a part again."

He happened to be holding his little, keen-edged camp hatchet in his hand, having been using it at the moment he heard Will calling. With this he walked about until he found just the little sapling he wanted. A few blows sufficed to lay it low.

The others watched for a moment in silence.

"I catch on to the game," said Bluff presently.

"And so do I," added Will. "That hook at the end gives it away. You intend to fish for the camera, eh, Frank?"

"Well, luckily, the box has a strap which I can easily catch, if only this pole happens to be long enough. Now, when I get out to a point just over the spot, one of you hand me the stick, will you?"

"Sure," replied Bluff, anxious to have a hand in the game.

"Oh, Frank! Be careful, please! Not for a dozen cameras would I see you fall down into that horrible snake den!" ejaculated Will.

"And notice that the limb isn't overly stout, pard," warned Bluff.

"But it happens to be a hickory tree, and there's no danger of it snapping off. I examined into all that before starting out, thank you. Now the stick, please."

When this was poked out to him, as he clung

to the down-hanging limb, Frank immediately placed himself in a position to angle for the black box.

"Is it long enough?" asked Will.

"Just, with nothing to spare," replied the other, as he sought to get the crotch of the stick under the strap of the camera.

"Look at 'em striking at it! My! ain't they mad, though? Just as if they had made up their minds to take to the business of picture snapping, and hated to be knocked out of the deal. Did you ever see such a writhing mass of snakes in your life?"

"I never did, Bluff. There! I had it fast, and that big rascal deliberately upset all my calculations by twisting over the strap. Seems as if they really knew what I was after, and meant to block me all they could."

Half a minute later and Will gave a cry of satisfaction, for the camera was coming slowly up from the depths, fastened to the end of Frank's stick.

"Say! look at 'em, will you? Ain't they mad, though? Frank, do you think it's safe for us to have the camp near such a snake den as this?" asked Bluff.

"Oh, yes; safe enough. It isn't as near as you seem to think. Besides, there happens to be a

brook between. I don't believe one of these snakes will ever cross that water. Still, I admit I'd feel better if the whole thing were wiped out."

"All right. I'm going to think up some way of doing it. Perhaps we could throw heaps of dead brush down there, and set it on fire. Another way would be to blow it up with a dynamite cartridge."

"Only we haven't got one," added Will quickly, as he rubbed his precious camera off with an old handkerchief, which he then threw away.

"Let's get away from here," said Frank, "and perhaps you'd better postpone all snapshotting in this neighborhood until after we have found some way to dispose of those ugly customers. They might make you trouble, Will."

Arriving back in camp, Frank went on with his preparations for supper. Adolphus must be tired after his long day of it on the way from town with that unwieldy load, and Frank thought it well to let the ancient darky rest up a bit before putting him at cooking for the hungry crowd.

Frank was always thinking of every one's comfort but his own, and this sort of thing made him an ideal comrade for a camping trip in the wilderness.

The supper was pronounced a success by all.

Even Bluff's stew of bear meat was tasty, and "filled a long-felt vacuum," as Jerry expressed it, when he passed up his pannikin for a third helping.

Despite their adventures of the day, which had been of an alarming character, the boys made merry, as youngsters always will, for trouble sets lightly on their shoulders, as a rule.

They sang and joked as they sat about the fire. Indeed, one would not think that any of them had the slightest cause for anxiety as the evening waned, and they made preparations for the first night on Lake Surprise, far up in the Sunset Mountains.

Frank and Will took a turn at blowing up the rubber mattresses, though Bluff could hardly be restrained from challenging Jerry to a trial.

Long after the others had crawled under the tents Frank sat there, thinking over the long list of queer things that had come to them in the short campaign since they left home a few days before.

Most of all, his thoughts seemed to run in line with Andy Lasher, and his mysterious mission into the hills. Could it be in connection with that escaped convict? And did the one-time actor, Thaddeus Lasher, have anything to do with

this humbug of a ghost, seen so often along Oak Ridge by various people?

Then, as he sat there, Frank took out the little gold locket which poor Jed had trusted to his keeping. Here was another mystery awaiting explanation. He looked at it very hard, as though wondering how he could penetrate to the secret attaching to that same small ornament, and learn just why the covetous old farmer, Cal Dobson, wanted to get possession of it so badly.

His boy chums were soundly sleeping long before this, but Frank had decided to keep watch as long as possible, when he would arouse Jerry.

And as he sat there, once in a while he would look around. The grim steeps of the mountains arose beyond, for the lake was far from being on the summit of the cluster known as Sunset Range.

He could hear Adolphus snoring back where he had his bed under a canvas fly. Once the old man awoke with startled exclamations about the ghost, but he had only been dreaming, and soon passed into slumberland again.

As Frank happened to look up to the side of the mountain he caught sight of a flare that came and went several times, as though it might be a signal, after which he saw it no more.

"That was strange," he muttered uneasily,

“and the more I see of things the stronger I feel that something mighty queer must be going on up in this region. What with a ghost roaming about, and a posse of officers searching for an escaped convict, anything is liable to happen at any time. H'm! That is a pleasant thought, now, but it's true, nevertheless.”

CHAPTER XIX

AN ORDER TO VACATE

RATTLE! Bang! bang!

"All hands on deck to repel boarders!" shouted Jerry, crawling forth.

"Hold on! I'm coming!" bawled Will, stopping, as usual, to grope for his camera, under the impression that there was something worth while doing outside.

Adolphus set up a series of alarming howls.

"Leab me go dis time, Mistah Ghostes, an' I sure nebber come up hyah ag'in, nohow!" he kept repeating, as if he already felt the cold hands of the mysterious specter, of which he had heard so much, encircling his throat.

When Jerry, Bluff, Will and Jed came creeping out of their canvas shelter, each armed according to his light, they looked in vain for unwelcome visitors.

Frank was doubled up on the ground, and seemed to be writhing as though in pain.

"What happened, Frank? Are you hurt?" demanded Bluff anxiously.

Then the other looked up.

"Tell me about that, will you? The fellow's laughing fit to beat the band! Say! is this fair, waking the whole camp up in the dead of night, for a lark?"

"Hold on, Jerry. Don't jump at conclusions. Because you see me having a quiet little laugh all to myself it isn't right to conclude I'm the guilty one. We did have a visitor, and that party is responsible for all the row," replied Frank.

"Was it the ghost again?" demanded Will.

"Not that I know of. I just had a glimpse of the wretch as he bolted. Truth to tell, I rather think he was more frightened than any of us."

"Not any of Pet's crowd, returned?"

"How about the farmer?"

"Neither one of you came within a mile of it, Jerry and Bluff. It was Br'er 'Coon who did the mischief," chuckled the other.

The boys muttered dire threats against the disturber of their dreams.

"I think he was prowling around in search of some little dainties in the way of food. Whoever put the cooking things away was mighty careful to pile the kettles up, but in such a way

that the least knock was bound to send the whole lot rattling down. That was what happened, as you can see for yourself."

"And Br'er 'Coon, he went supperless," laughed Will.

"No damage done, I suppose?" said Jerry.

"Only to the feelings of the sleepers. Poor old Adolphus believed the day of judgment had come, for certain. I heard him muttering something about chicken, and I rather guess he has some weight on his mind which he thought it time to confess," chuckled Frank.

"I don't believe the old chap has many serious sins to answer for, but I really did believe the end of the world had come. Say! talk to me about your jamborees! Those same aluminum kettles and cups and pannikins just have everything else beat to a frazzle when it comes to noise. No need of a battery to repel the enemy when you can set that racket going."

"Well, I was just thinking of waking one of you up and changing guard."

"What time is it, Frank?" yawned Jerry.

"About one," replied the other quietly.

"Jerusalem! And you let us snooze all that time while you sat here on deck to fend off the evil spirits? It's hardly fair, that's what. Now I'm as wide-awake as a hawk after that row, and

couldn't go to sleep if I tried. The rest of you scuttle back to your blankets and leave me alone," declared Bluff.

"Wake me about three, then," admonished Jerry.

"That's all right. I'll see that you do your little stunt, don't worry. Now skip out. Frank, did you see anything?"

"Nothing except a flare that came and went several times up on the side of the mountain," replied the other, in a low tone, meant only for Bluff's ear.

"A flare? Do you mean by that a waving lantern or a torch?" asked his chum.

"A torch, most likely. I tried to make out whether it was only being carried by some one who passed behind bunches of trees from time to time, or if it could be a signal of some sort, but was unable to make up my mind up to the time it disappeared and returned no more."

"A signal? Who would be making one, do you suppose?" asked Bluff uneasily.

"H'm! It might be the ghost, you know. Then, again, perhaps some of that miserable Peters tribe are still hanging around, bent on making life a burden to us. But I finally concluded that the chances were it must have come from some member of the sheriff's posse, trying to let

others know about some discovery he may have made up there," returned Frank.

In the case of Jerry he might have said more, but, as yet, Bluff had not been taken into full confidence, and knew next to nothing about the relations supposed to exist between the ghost and Andy Lasher.

"Well, I'll promise to keep an eye on that dark region up yonder. If anything happens that looks serious I'm going to wake you up, Frank," went on the other.

"I wish you would, old fellow," and with a yawn Frank crawled into his cozy nook, where his blanket awaited him.

He knew no more until morning came, and the sound of voices outside aroused him. Looking out through the front of the tent, he could see the slight mists of the new-born day rising off the lake, as happens very frequently, no matter how high the altitude of the water.

"That's a mighty pretty picture for a fellow to see when he tumbles out of bed, and it's me for a dip and a rub-down before anything else."

So saying, he jumped out, made a dash for the water, and was in with a headlong leap.

"Hey! Who's that taking his bath at such an unseemly hour?" called the voice of Bluff, and

soon afterward, with various grunts, he poked his head out.

"You don't seem as chipper as usual," remarked Jerry, who was sitting by the fire, coaxing the blaze to resume operations for the morning meal.

"Well, what would you expect after such a strenuous day? I didn't sleep as well as I might, either. That experience haunts a fellow," muttered Bluff.

"How about you, Will?" continued Jerry, as another head appeared.

"I guess I'm all right, only a little sore around the waist. When a fellow is nearly pulled in two he must expect to feel it a day or so afterward," was the frank reply.

"Then I'd advise you not to take your regular dip this morning," went on Jerry.

"Not me! I've had enough of water for several days, I reckon. Every time my feet touched bottom I'd be shivering, thinking of the soft feel of that plagued quicksand. But Frank seems to be enjoying his bath all right."

"Oh, Frank can do nearly anything. And now I'm going to join him, for here comes Adolphus to look after things."

Neither Frank nor Jerry cared to stay in more than a few minutes. The water was very cold, and a dip was really all they needed to start the

blood to bounding through their veins and set them up for the day.

"Nothing happened while you were on deck, I suppose, Jerry?" asked Frank, as they splashed about and tried to keep from having their teeth chatter with the chill of the water.

"Not a blessed thing. Seems to be my luck, lately, to choose the wrong time to meet up with things," grumbled the other.

"Well, you've had your turn in the past. I remember when it seemed as though everything was coming your way, and the rest of us had to take a back seat. In the long run matters even up, you know," admonished Frank.

"Yes, I guess you're right there. That was a great day and night I had when we were camped up in the woods above Lumber Run. Things happened then, all right, what with my getting that deer, being treed by the wild dogs, afterward sniffed at by a bear in whose hollow tree-trunk I had taken refuge from the storm; and last, but not least, rescuing poor Andy from under the fallen tree. I hang up my hat. It will be a long time before any one of you beat that record," smiled Jerry.

"I'm going to get out. A little of this bath goes a long way with me, especially so early in the morning."

"Ugh! That's what I say, too!" exclaimed Jerry, making for the shore.

Already the tantalizing odor of bacon was beginning to permeate the air. Adolphus seemed to be right there on the job, and he could be trusted to get up a meal calculated to tempt the appetite of even a jaded business man in the woods, not to speak of five hungry boys, always ready to eat.

Frank was just finishing dressing in his tent when he heard the others uttering exclamations of surprise outside.

"What's the matter?" he demanded aloud.

"Come out and see for yourself," answered Jerry.

This, of course, piqued his curiosity, and he immediately issued forth. He found the others clustered around Jerry, who was holding up what looked like a piece of rather dirty paper, on which something had been written, or rather printed in capital letters.

Frank joined the group, and as he glanced at the document he found it to be what might be called a warning, reading like this:

NOTICE!

Better leave here at once, or it will be bad for all of you!

CHAPTER XX

A MORNING WITH THE BLACK BASS

"WHERE did you get this, Jerry?" asked Frank after he had read it.

"It was fastened to the trunk of a tree over there—that big oak."

"Now that you mention it, I can remember seeing something white there early last night. I thought it was only one of your jokes, and declined to investigate," was the comment of Frank.

"That's a point worth knowing. It proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that it was pinned there before we retired, or shortly after, at any rate," remarked Bluff.

"Talk to me about your Sherlock Holmes and his deductions! Did he ever do any better than that pard of mine? It's the lawyer blood showing early in life, just as Will here, when he can forget his old photography for a minute, is itching to bind up somebody's wounds, simply because his father used to be a doctor, and he has inherited a bit of his skill."

"Who do you think put it there?" Frank continued.

"Why, that blooming old ghost, to be sure," was Jerry's prompt reply.

"Looks like a schoolboy's writing," suggested Will sagaciously.

"Perhaps it is," said Frank, looking at Jerry and nodding.

"But you said before you thought that Peters crowd had gone back to town!"

"And I still think so; but you forget that there was another boy up in this region lately, Will."

"You mean Andy Lasher?" exclaimed the one addressed, quickly.

"Yes; and both Jerry and myself have a pretty good idea that he is responsible for this warning to get out."

"But why should Andy want us to leave? He didn't say a word about it the other day, when we saw him. Look here! I've nursed a notion for some time that you two fellows had something between you the rest of us didn't share. Do you think it fair to treat your own true chums that way?" demanded Bluff.

Frank laughed.

"To tell the truth, I don't, Bluff. I've been feeling badly about it for some time, and was

determined to take the rest of you into our confidence," he said.

"All right. What better time than while we are eating breakfast, for there's old Adolphus ready to bang the frying-pan as a summons?" declared Will.

Both Bluff and Will showed more or less eagerness to hear what was in the wind, as they began to eat. Frank took pity on them, and with sundry helps from Jerry managed to tell the whole story.

"This seems to just about 'cap the climax,' as they say," remarked Bluff, after he had learned all the facts known to the others.

"Never listened to a more entrancing tale in all my life. Frank, you're sure a born story-teller," declared Will.

"And so the sheriff is hunting that escaped convict, and you believe he must be the father of poor Andy? Say! I feel sorry for him now. Never did before, you understand; but a fellow with his dad in prison has got a load on his shoulders. As Jerry says, that may account for some of his badness," Bluff went on.

"What are we going to do if the sheriff pops in on us?" questioned Jerry.

"Perhaps he'll want us to lend him a hand in

rounding up his game," said Frank, just to ascertain the feelings of his chums on the subject.

"Not for me, he won't!" was the emphatic protest of Bluff.

"I'm up here for a quiet outing, and don't calculate to join with a sheriff's posse to hunt down a wretched escaped convict," avowed Will.

Whereupon Jerry solemnly shook each of them by the hand.

"Thank you, fellows. But I ought to have known that you'd say just that. Pard of mine wouldn't look at the matter any other way. If this runaway from the penitentiary happened to be a bloodthirsty wretch, now, it might be different; but he was sent up purely on circumstantial evidence, and has always declared that he was innocent. Thank you again, both of you," he said with feeling.

"Then it is agreed that while we don't expect to throw any obstacles in the way of our good friend, Mr. Dodd, the sheriff, who is only doing his duty by the State, none of us will raise a hand to assist him—is that your sentiment, boys?" asked Frank, who wanted to have the important matter settled one way or the other.

"It is, unanimously. Perhaps later on we may learn just why Thaddeus Lasher wants to keep people away from this region while he lingers

here. That is a mystery just at present, it seems, and we can only amuse ourselves guessing at it."

"Jerry speaks our mind, eh, Will?" said Bluff.

"Every time. And now what are we going to do to-day to amuse ourselves?"

"I'm anxious to try and see if there are bass in this lake," said Frank.

"I've been told there are whopping big fellows, so you'd better be careful how you cast and strike, or you may break your fine tackle," remarked Will.

"If you don't mind, pard, I'm going with you in the big Injun canoe," observed Jerry, whose sporting blood was always ready for new conquests with gun and rod.

"Will and myself will take a shy at that snake den, and see if we can burn the pesky things out. Somehow, I don't just like having such close neighbors, eh, Will?"

"You bet we will; and perhaps I'll have a chance to snap them off a few times. They gave me a scare all right, yesterday, and I'm wanting to even up the score. Come on, then, Bluff. Get an old pair of gloves for handling the dead brush; some of it has thorns, as I found out to my cost."

So the party divided up.

Frank and Jerry pushed off soon afterward, and paddled up the lake. It was just the sport

that appealed to the hearts of these two lovers of nature, and as the silvery drops fell from the ends of their paddles the soft "swish" was sweetest music in their ears.

Selecting a point which, to their practiced eyes, promised the best results, they started in. Jerry took the paddle first, while Frank cast his flies alluringly on the water, close to the shore, and drew them toward the boat. A soft morning air just rippled the dark water and made the conditions ideal for such sport, as the boys declared again and again.

Hardly had Frank made half a dozen splendid casts than his wrist was suddenly turned with a quick jerk that snapped the hook of the Red Ibis fly fast in the jaw of an adventurous bass, eager for a dainty breakfast.

"Good!" was the only comment of Jerry, who knew the value of silence when upon a fishing trip, since the water carries all sounds so readily.

Frank played his prize back and forth with a practiced hand. He seemed as cool as the oldest veteran fisherman could have been. Even when the big fellow, that must have weighed all of two pounds, flashed out of the water by several feet, turning over in the air in a graceful arch, with the intention of breaking the hook or line, Frank only lowered the bending tip of his rod

a trifle, so as to give the fish a slack line and thwart his design.

For several minutes the exciting battle went on. The wily bass tried all the various tricks handed down from generations of ancestors, but he was matched now against one likely to prove his master. In the end, Jerry scooped him up with the landing-net, and held up the glistening beauty.

"Hand me that bit of hard wood, please, Frank. I always make it a point to kill my fish when I land him, to put the poor thing out of agony," he said.

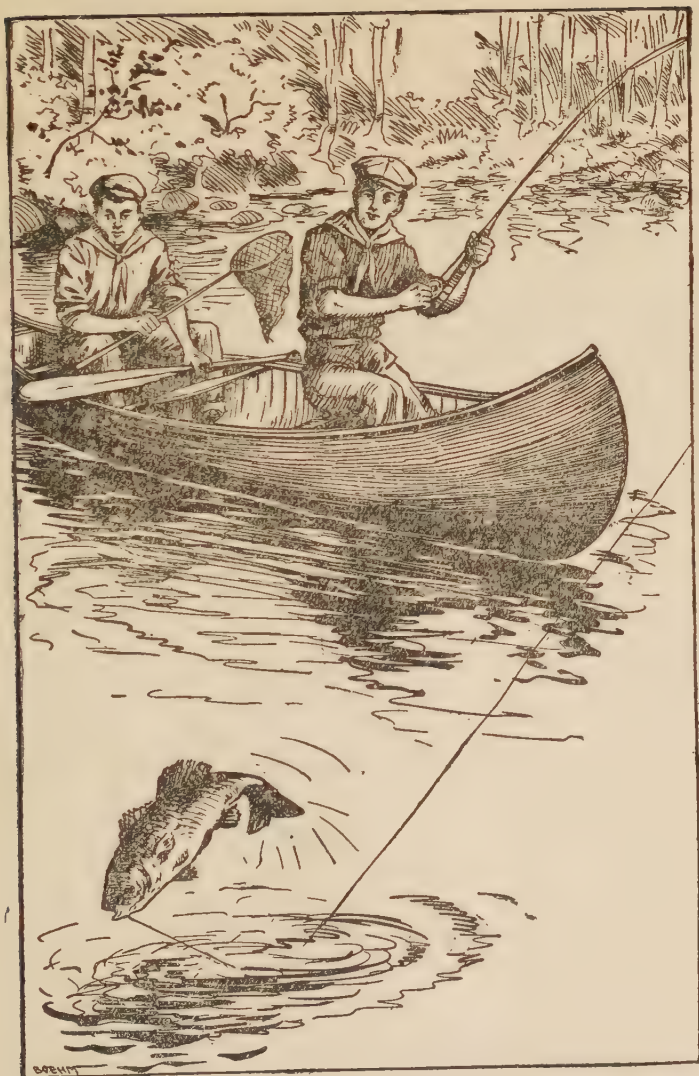
"And you do quite right, old fellow. I only wish there were more sportsmen like you. More power to your elbow, say I. Shall I paddle a bit, now, and give you a chance to straighten out your casting-arm?" observed Frank.

"Just as you say. The sight of such a dandy bass excites the blood of an enthusiastic fisherman, you know."

It took Jerry but little longer to hook the mate to Frank's catch. As fortune would have it, however, after he had played him for a minute or two there was a suspicious slackening of the line.

"He's off," remarked Frank, grieved.

"My own fault. I should have tested that leader better. See where it's broken! All the



FOR SEVERAL MINUTES THE EXCITING BATTLE WENT ON.

The Outdoor Chums in the Forest.

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rest seems sound but that one spot," grunted Jerry, annoyed at his lack of caution, though he should have known that in spite of their experience the best of sportsmen, being human, will make blunders at times.

He soon had a new leader, with its cast of three flies, trailing in the water to soften the snells. At the end he carried the Red Ibis, then next came a fly called the Professor, and last of all the Montreal. This was Jerry's ideal cast, for any sort of day, the light flies showing up despite lowering skies, and the dark Montreal counting when the sun shone.

Hardly had he made a new throw when he struck game, and the fight was on once more. This time Jerry knew no accident would mar his fun.

"Talk to me about your preserves! What could equal the fight of a two-pound black bass in this ice-cold water up here in the mountains? Say, Frank, this pays for the whole trip," he said in a low but exultant tone, as he saw his chum take the landing-net, and with a skilful scoop gather in the partly exhausted fish, glistening among the knotted cords like silver.

"It certainly looks as though we would have a fine fish dinner to-day. Already we have enough to go around, Jerry."

"Hardly. I feel equal to one whole fish myself, for I bet they taste just prime, taken out of this clear water, with so much rocky shore around the lake. From one end to the other I don't see a sign of marsh or reeds that would indicate mud. It's the prettiest little lake I ever fished over. If it only happened to be nearer town, now, so we could get to it oftener," remarked Frank.

"Yes, and that would mean every Tom, Dick and Harry would fish, so the sport must soon be ruined."

"You're right in that. Are you paddling now?"

And so they went on for an hour or two. The sport kept up pretty well, for each of them caught some half-dozen fine bass, though the last four were returned to the water because they already had much more than they could possibly use at one meal.

"Better get them fresh when we want them," advised Frank.

Finally they stopped fishing, and paddled to camp, where the rest admired their prizes, and Adolphus eagerly set to work cleaning the same for dinner. The others had succeeded in throwing quite a lot of brush into the snake hole, but were not quite ready to set fire to it.

Dinner was just ready, and the boys, seating

themselves, in anticipation of a big treat, when Bluff exclaimed:

"Somebody coming, yonder, boys! Two of 'em!"

"It's Sheriff Dodd and one of his deputies. I felt sure we'd see something of him before the day was over. Remember what we agreed, fellows," said Frank cautiously, as he watched the tall officer drawing near.

As Sheriff Dodd passed under the tree where the "Notice" had been posted they saw him stop and examine the ground, as though interested. Then he came on.

"Hello, boys! Glad to see you having such a bully time. I reckon you've found the bass, all right, judging from the smell," he greeted them with.

"Plenty for you and your friend, Mr. Dodd. Adolphus told us about your being up here, and I kind of looked to see you pop in; so we had enough dinner cooked to give you a share. Sit down here, both of you," remarked Frank, making room.

"That's nice of you, boys, and I sure appreciate it. Of course we will. Sit down, Bill, right here, and make yourself at home. But, look here, boys, have you missed anything last night?" went on the sheriff, seriously.

"Missed anything? Why, no, not that we've noticed. What makes you ask that, Mr. Dodd?" questioned Frank.

"Oh, because I see you've had a thief pretty nigh you. I saw the print of his shoe in the soil over there under that tree. It was made by a *prison* shoe, and I ought to know the brand, all right," said the sheriff.

Frank and Jerry exchanged glances. What Mr. Dodd had said only added strength to the theory they had formed regarding the relations between Andy Lasher and the escaped convict.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SHERIFF DIPS INTO FAIRY STORIES

"SHOW Mr. Dodd our notice to leave, Bluff," said Frank laughingly.

"Reach around and get it, Will, please. It's just back of you. Thanks. There you are, sir. Our lease is up, apparently, and we must get out, unless we want to have things made disagreeable for us."

The sheriff elevated his eyebrows.

"I expect this is some more doings of this wonderful ghost," he remarked shrewdly.

"We have an idea that way, sir. What do you think it means? Why should any one play such a silly game? What is there valuable up here that he should want to frighten people away?" asked Frank.

By putting it up to the sheriff he fancied he could ascertain what Mr. Dodd thought before confessing how they had figured the matter out. If his ideas corresponded with their own it would then be time enough to confess.

"Well, boys, it's all simple enough to me, knowing the ins and outs as I do. In brief, the fellow responsible for this work up here, playing ghost and the like, is the very man we're looking for. He was once an actor, and I suppose the old spirit clings to him. He had a reason for not wanting inquisitive people up here while he was doing something, and the ghost is the result of his figuring how best to keep 'em away. Reckon that same thing would just *draw* some persons I know," and the sheriff chuckled as he looked knowingly at the four lads.

"Yes, we did come up here partly to find out if there was any truth in those stories. You remember we had a part in showing up the yarn about the wild man of Wildcat Island, last spring. It turned out to be a couple of hoboes who wanted to keep campers away from the place so they could stay there," remarked Jerry.

"And you thought this might prove to be something the same. Well, it has, for I'm dead sure that Thaddeus Lasher is responsible for the appearance of the ghost of Oak Ridge. Now, you wonder why I say that. I've a mind to tell you the whole story from the start, since you've been so obliging to me and my deputy here."

"Oh! please do, Mr. Dodd!" urged Will.

"All right. Then listen, boys. You've heard

how these two men broke out, and how we got one with the dogs, long ago. The other escaped us by using means that I hardly think were fair to the dogs, though, of course, one can't blame a poor chap trying for his liberty."

"Yes, we heard about the red pepper dodge, sir, and thought it pretty clever; and that man has been at large ever since then?" said Frank.

"He has. I've been expecting to hear of him up in this section, but he kept away for some months, perhaps knowing we'd be on the lookout for him. You wonder what has drawn him up here, of course, and that's what I'm going to tell now. I give you my word, boys, you'll find it one of the strangest stories ever."

Mr. Dodd ate in silence for a few minutes, and then resumed:

"Last winter this convict tried to interest the wardens of the prison, and the chief keeper, particularly, in a wild story he told, connected with his innocence of the burglary that sent him up for a long term."

"How long was it, sir? I am asking because we know Andy Lasher, and have for five years, but never dreamed his dad was in prison," queried Bluff, who always wanted the particulars, lawyer fashion.

"Six years ago it happened, and he was sent

up for ten, after good behavior was deducted. So you see he had some four years ahead of him, worth fighting for. But about this story that made the head warden laugh, for he believed it only sprung from the brain of a half-crazy man.

"Lasher said that he was with an old thief who had died in the prison. He must have done something to win the good-will of the sick man, for he said that the other made a confession to him before he breathed his last. In short, he owned that it had been no other than himself who had committed the burglary for which Thaddeus Lasher was doing time."

Again he paused, to let this sink home. The boys looked at each other, and said not a word, eagerly waiting for Mr. Dodd to go on.

"Now, it happened that the man whose house was robbed was a queer sort. He had heaps of money, but spent his time in making collections of precious jewels, and in experimenting along the line of photography."

"That hits Will, here, for he just dotes on such a fad," said Bluff.

"It came out in the trial that this smart gentleman had set a trap by which he expected to get a photograph of any would-be thief who tried to open his safe, containing many valuable gems. He had a camera hidden from view, and so placed

that when he made connections at retiring, unless these were broken first, any one who took hold of the safe would set a flashlight off, and have his picture taken, free of expense."

The boys, who had listened with eagerness, uttered exclamations at this point.

"Talk to me about the smartness of that Dicky, will you!" said Jerry.

"How about it, Will? Could such a thing be done?" asked Bluff.

"I think so. I have a recollection of reading about something like that having once sent a bad man to the gallows. Of course, if the fellow had enough nerve to stick it out, he could search for the camera, and destroy the plate," remarked Will.

"Well said, my boy. That was just what happened in this case, Lasher claimed—that is, the burglar hunted around after recovering from his fright, and found the concealed camera. But he did not smash the plate. Instead, after he had looted the safe he just carried away the holder containing the exposed plate."

"What for?" demanded Bluff.

"He must have been a sort of humorous chap, and wanted to see how he looked at the time he was doing business," laughed Frank.

"Nobody knows why he took it away. Perhaps he meant to break it later, but when he got to

thinking it over he determined to have it developed, just to see what it was. So one night he visited a photographer, and threatening him, if he ever mentioned the fact to a living soul, went with him into his dark-room and saw the plate developed. Lasher even mentioned the name of the man who developed it, but the head warden only laughed the harder.

"Even then the man never had a print made. Perhaps he intended to later. Meanwhile, he buried his swag from the robbery, together with this same plate, up here in these very Sunset Mountains, where, as a boy, long before, he used to live, on the road that leads to Chester, not far from here."

Again Mr. Dodd paused to eat a little more. He knew how to keep the interest at fever heat. The boys could hardly breathe, they were so excited at this point.

"Please go on, sir," said Will finally.

"Lasher claimed that if he were only given an opportunity, he could lead one of the prison wardens to the place where, after a little search, he felt positive he would be able to produce not only the lost plunder, but the missing plate, which must prove his entire innocence, if it were still in a good state of preservation.

"The head of the institution has so many fairy

stories told him by prisoners who want only a chance to slip away, that he would not listen to such a thing. After repeated failures to get his case heard, it seems that Lasher conspired with one of his fellows. The result was the break from confinement, the pursuit, and his final escape by means of the pepper he must have carried with him for just such a purpose."

"I never heard anything so strange, Mr. Dodd. It certainly sounds like a fairy story, and I can't wonder at the head warden for doubting it. But Will, here, who is something of an authority, says that photographic part is easy enough," declared Frank, thinking that he was expected to say something.

"Well, as I said, we lost all track of the man. Nobody knows where he was hidden all these long weeks. I came up into the hills to investigate, and found it just as he declared. There were the ruins of an old homestead near the road across the lake yonder, and they told me that an old man by the name of Fletcher had once lived there. That was the real name of the dead convict thief.

"I haunted the place for a week, but saw no signs of my man. Then I concluded that he must have been there, hunted for the plunder, found it, and perhaps carried it away, determined that

since he had paid the penalty for the robbery he might as well enjoy the fruits."

"Do you think so now?" asked Frank during another pause.

"No, I don't. The appearance of this so-called ghost set me to thinking. Then in a roundabout way I learned, only recently, that one night a man was seen sneaking away from the little humble house where Mrs. Lasher and her children live. So you see, I began to piece things together, and finally I came to a conclusion.

"I believed that Thaddeus Lasher had finally come to hunt for the plunder hidden by Fletcher, and that he was having much more trouble finding the same than he had expected. In order not to be bothered in his labor he had hit on this ghost dodge to scare the country jays off. I remembered that he had been an actor in his better days, before he began to drink and get in bad company.

"Accordingly, I finally concluded that it would pay me to make another trip up to the vicinity of Sunset Lake, this time fetching along several deputies, for I did not know how desperate a man Lasher might prove. I heard from Adolphus that your party was up here, and wondered if by any chance you might have run across the man I am hunting for; but I reckon you haven't up to now."

Mr. Dodd smiled as he once more glanced at the warning that had been fastened to the oak tree, as if that circumstance aided him more or less in coming to the conclusion he had.

CHAPTER XXII

PADDLING ACROSS LAKE SURPRISE

"WHAT do you think, Mr. Dodd? Was that story told by Fletcher the truth, or just the imagination of a dying man?" asked Frank.

The sheriff scratched his head. His air was that of a man who, being cautious by nature, is slow to commit himself.

"To tell you the honest truth, boys, I just don't know what to think. The thing has got me locoed, as they say out West. It looks as if Lasher can't find what he is hunting for. The only thing for me to do is to lay low until he shows his hand, and then try to gather him in. I know my duty, and nothing can sheer me off, no matter how sorry I might feel for the poor chap."

The dinner was finished, and all pronounced it fine.

"Never ate better bass in my life, and that coon sure knows how to cook 'em, too," declared the sheriff heartily. And Adolphus grinned with de-

light to be thus publicly complimented by an officer of the State.

After a while the two men wandered off, though promising to return by night, as another meal like that was a great temptation, and the invitation pressing.

The boys went in a bunch to assist Will and Bluff to clean out the snake den, as a means for passing time and doing a good deed. More brush was dragged over and thrown down into the hole, regardless of the angry hissing of the numerous ugly crawlers to be seen sunning themselves there.

"All ready for the grand finale!" shouted Bluff, after Will had secured a picture of the whole scene.

Upon which burning bunches of dead grass were thrown in. The brush took fire fairly well, being pretty dry, and presently a leaping furnace of flames announced the end of the snakes' paradise. Possibly not one of them could escape the terrific scorching, unless their holes ran deeper into the rocks than the boys imagined.

"That job is done, and well done. Now what?" asked Bluff.

Frank announced that he had several small tasks which he wanted to attend to. Jerry threw his gun over his shoulder and sauntered forth for a ramble, but did not mean to shoot any game he might happen to run across, being a believer

in the laws that protect deer, grouse, rabbits, and such, for the better part of the year.

On his part, Bluff had some work to do in connection with the bearskin which he was trying to cure, after certain directions given by old Jesse Wilcox, the veteran trapper, whom the boys had visited the preceding fall.

Will, of course, could always find something to do in connection with his photographic work, for he carried a little tank along with him into the woods, and in this he developed his films, day or night.

Jed seemed quite satisfied to keep busy around the fire. He assisted Adolphus, and, indeed, was ready to anticipate the needs of any of these fine fellows whose kindness to a poor waif would never be forgotten.

It was about an hour before sunset that Frank called out to him:

"Jed! Come here, please!"

The lad saw a smile of satisfaction on Frank's face, and somehow he seemed to be thrilled with a sudden hope.

"You never knew that the back of this locket could be detached—that is, removed—did you?" asked Frank.

"No. Can it?" asked the other, his eyes full of eager anticipation.

"Yes. I suspected that it might, and on examining it closely saw how it could be done. With my knife-blade I removed the back, and found this."

He held up a paper. It was very thin, and seemed to be covered with printing, together with some writing.

"Oh! What is it?" gasped the little chap, staring at the document, which really seemed too large to have occupied so small a space in the locket.

"As far as I can make out, it represents stock to the extent of five hundred shares in the Consolidated Hecla Gold Mine. Bushels of just such stuff is printed every year, for the purpose of defrauding innocent people. Perhaps this was sold to your father for the same purpose, Jed," said Frank.

"Then you believe it ain't worth anything?" remarked the boy, with keen disappointment.

"I didn't say that. At the time, perhaps, it wasn't worth the paper it was printed on; but conditions may have changed. Possibly they have made a valuable strike at the mines of the Consolidated Hecla. The eagerness of your uncle to get possession of this document would seem to prove that."

"But how would he know this paper was in my locket?" went on the boy.

"That's something I can't say. He evidently found it out somehow or other, or he wouldn't have been so determined to get possession of the locket. Its value in dollars and cents wouldn't amount to much, you see. Now, as soon as I get back home I shall see Jerry's father, who is a banker, and he can tell us if there is any real value attached to this stock. If so, you are a lucky fellow, Jed."

"And I owe it all to you, Frank, you and the rest. How can I ever thank you for being so kind?" he cried, seizing the other's hand.

"Please don't try, Jed. Why, we haven't done anything worth mentioning; it was just fun to upset the calculations of your old uncle. In fact, we feel under obligations to you for the chance."

Just then Mr. Dodd appeared once more, with his deputy.

"No luck so far, but we live in hopes of finding our man sooner or later. We mean to keep an eye on those old ruins until something turns up. Room for two at your fire to-night, boys?" said the sheriff as he came up.

Of course they greeted him warmly. Mr. Dodd was a man whom the boys all liked, because he always felt a sympathetic interest in their sports

and games, never forgetting, as some men do, that he was once a boy himself.

Adolphus, spurred on by the compliment of the noon meal, excelled himself in the effort to please. The result was a bumper spread, which called forth much praise all around.

They also spent a very pleasant evening, chatting on various subjects. Mr. Dodd was plainly not worrying. He cast frequent glances across the lake, as if half expecting to see some sort of signal from that quarter, but none came.

Nor was there any alarm during the night. In fact, with two officers of the law in their midst the boys did not even bother keeping watch.

Another morning found them again gathered around the board, discussing heaping piles of the most delicious flapjacks ever eaten in any camp. It was simply astonishing how many each of those hungry boys put away; and as for the two guests, they fairly showered the cook with compliments, until he seemed to be shaking with good-humor.

"Now we must say good-by for a while, boys. It was a bully time we had with you. Perhaps we may look in again some day. Be good to yourselves." With which the worthy sheriff stalked away.

An hour later, Frank, finding that the boys

seemed to stick to the camp as if expecting him to suggest something, called them together.

"What do you say, fellows, that we take the canoes and paddle across the lake to where he said the ruins of the old Fletcher home lie?"

"Hear! hear! That just suits my blood!" declared Bluff.

"And I'm in the racket, you understand," observed Jerry, picking up his gun.

"Please don't think of leaving me behind. Now the chances are there will be something worth while to snap off over there, so if none of you object I'm going to carry my camera along."

Of course this was from Will, and as there were no protests, he did it, too.

Adolphus and Jed were left in charge of the camp. With the sheriff's posse roaming the neighborhood, there did not seem to be any likelihood of unwelcome visitors while they were away. Besides, Bluff had kindly consented to leave his gun in his tent, and Jed knew how to fire the same. Three shots in rapid order would bring the quartet back in double-quick time.

Landing on the other side, they made their way up the rise. The place was overgrown with briars and stubborn thickets, but they knew it had once been cleared, so they were not long in discovering the ruins of the house.

Some vandal had fired it, perhaps long after it had been abandoned as a place of residence, so that with the foundations only charred remnants of the building were to be seen.

Though the boys looked around eagerly, expecting to see some sign of the sheriff or his men, they failed to detect anything to indicate the presence of others.

"Looks pretty dismal around here, and it is hard to believe that once, many years ago, it had a busy family working to clear off the land and plant it," remarked Frank, who had a little of the romantic mixed with his practical ideas.

"Stand still, fellows. I've got you grouped nicely, now. Look pleasant, and as if you didn't know you were being snapped. There you are, with the ruins as a background. Thank you."

"Frank, there's some one watching us from the bushes yonder," whispered Bluff.

"You're right, and I think I can guess. Jerry, you know! Call him over here. I've an idea he wants to speak to us, and yet seems afraid, for some reason. Perhaps he knows the sheriff is around somewhere," said Frank.

Upon which Jerry took a few steps forward, and waving his hand, called out:

"Andy! No use hiding; we see you! Come here!"

CHAPTER XXIII

DOCTOR WILL TO THE FRONT

THERE was a little hesitation.

Then the figure in the bushes came rapidly toward them. It was Andy Lasher, just as they had guessed. He looked dreadfully worried, as though he found himself up against a problem that overtaxed his abilities; for Andy was only a boy, though for a long time he had been the acknowledged bully of Centerville.

"Jerry, I'm glad to see you, sure I am," he said awkwardly as he came up.

Jerry noticed, first of all, that Andy held out his hand, as if he wanted to shake, something he seldom did; and then, again, that he was trembling all over.

"The fellow has had a bad shock of some kind," remarked Frank in a low tone, as his eye took in these facts, so significant in themselves, and especially when one remembered just why the sheriff was in that vicinity.

"What's the matter, Andy?" asked Jerry soothingly.

"Ain't one o' you fellers in the doctor line?" demanded the other hoarsely.

"Well, Will, here, knows a good deal about medicine and such things. You see his dad was an M.D. before he died, which means a medical doctor. But if you're sick better come over to our camp and let him fix up something for you," said Jerry.

"Tain't me," replied Andy desperately, and looking quickly around him as if he feared listening ears might catch his words.

"Then who?"

"They's a feller near by who had a bad tumble. I'm afraid he's got a broken leg. If your friend could only see him, and do somethin' for him. He's groanin' with pain, leastways as much as he dares. Will you bring him, Jerry?"

"Of course; but why not let the others go along, Andy? We might want to lift your—a—friend, you know, and four would be better than two. Besides, you can trust us not to say one word."

Andy started violently and stared at Jerry.

"Then—you know?" he ejaculated, in some confusion.

"Yes, all about it; and we feel sorry for you, too. Come! If he is suffering, something must

be done, or he may die. Don't hesitate any longer, but take us to where he is hiding. I'm sure my pard can do something to help him," said Jerry.

The other's indecision came to an end.

"I will, then, by gum! Come on!" he exclaimed between his set teeth.

Frank, looking around, thought that he had just the faintest glimpse of something moving amid the neighboring bushes; but then it might have been a prowling chipmunk or an inquisitive raccoon.

He fell in line, and trailed after the others, wondering just how the affair was going to end. Evidently, Andy's father, in wandering about the rough region after dark, had slipped once too often on the rocks, and come to serious harm.

The boy led them past the ruins, and up the side of a steep ascent. Several times he stopped and looked sharply down and around, as though suspicious of the strange stillness that had fallen upon all Nature. Even the birds seemed to have ceased their quarreling, and the crows that had been cawing in a dead tree near the lake front at the time our boys landed, had suddenly taken their departure, as though bent on seeking new pastures.

The difficulties increased as they ascended further. Great masses of rock seemed to be piled

up all around them. It was as if giants had been using the slope for a playground, and heaved these tremendous bodies of stone hither and thither in endless confusion.

"H'm!" thought Frank as he noted these things. "I don't wonder much that our friend, Mr. Dodd, and his men, found trouble in discovering where the fugitive convict was secreted. A fellow could easily hide here, and laugh at the efforts of a dozen men to find him."

He, too, had taken to glancing behind him as he went. Somehow, something seemed to tell him that their movements were being watched. Still, not a thing did he see at any time to warrant this belief, and it would seem absurd to have warned Andy when he had nothing more substantial upon which to found his theory.

Besides, Frank figured that if the escaped convict were really seriously hurt, he must give himself up. He would need the attention of a surgeon in order to save his life, even though such action meant a return to his prison cell.

Andy had stopped now. They were just in front of a crevice in the rocks that reminded Frank not a little of that in which they had hunted for a second bear at the time he and Bluff shot the black invader of the camp.

"I guess we've got to the end of the hunt," he whispered in the ear of Will, who nodded assent.

After one last anxious look all around, as if he wanted to reassure himself, Andy bent low and moved ahead.

"Come on, Jerry, and look out for your head," he said.

"Have a care, fellows, or you'll get a knock on your top that will hurt," was the way in which the worthy addressed passed the warning along.

It was not dark in the crevice, for enough light seeped in from above to show them how to step. Every one of the boys was strangely thrilled. They were about to be brought face to face with the escaped convict, who, they had good reason to believe, was also the person responsible for that ghostly figure which had alarmed such wayfarers as were in the habit of passing across the mountains when going from Centerville over to Chester.

After several twistings and turnings they came to what looked like an enlargement of the crevice. In fact, the place could now be called a cave, for it seemed to have a roof far above their heads.

A fire was smoldering in one corner, as though it might have been used earlier in the day for getting breakfast, and by what light came from this source Frank could see something stirring over in another corner.

"Andy, is that you?" asked a voice, in which there seemed to be a sort of groan.

"Yes, it's me, daddy," returned their guide, shuffling forward.

"Have you got help?" asked the other weakly.

Frank instantly made up his mind then that the man had sent Andy out to bring assistance in his time of need. Perhaps he had given over all idea of escape now. Perhaps he did not care, being overwhelmed with disappointment. Andy had held back because he had been in one sense ashamed to let the boys know that he had a parent who was a convict.

"The boys come with me. They was over lookin' at the ruins of the house," replied the other, bending down; and there seemed to be real solicitude in his manner, something Frank noticed with a strange feeling at his heart.

"Only the boys! What good can they do me? I told you to find some of those men and bring them here. I've dodged and hidden all I mean to!" exclaimed the injured man firmly.

"But one of 'em is somethin' of a doctor; least-ways, his daddy used to be, an' Jerry he says he knows a heap about medicine. P'raps he kin do for ye all right," went on Andy, hurriedly and soothingly.

Will now pushed forward with professional

zeal. He was, in truth, very fond of a chance to air his knowledge, and since he had been studying with the idea that at some time after he was through college he would take up his father's profession, his knowledge of medicine was equal to that of many full-fledged doctors.

"Let me look, and see how badly you are injured, sir," he said.

"I slipped on the rocks and had a bad tumble. You see I'm not as strong as some men, though much better than for a long time. I think I must have lain there all of an hour before Andy found me and helped me in here to lie down. But the pain and swelling continued to get worse, so that I could not stand it; so I sent him out for help. I'm willing to go back now—more than willing."

So he talked as Will began to look at his leg. He found it pretty well bruised, and swollen, too. The way in which he felt here and there would have given confidence to a man in far less desperate need of help than this stricken giant.

"What is it—a broken bone?" asked the man anxiously, as he saw Will seem to consider, which he took to be a serious sign.

"I'm glad to say it isn't. The bruises are painful, and there is also a sprain that you will feel for many months; but no break of the bone," he replied.

"Talk to me about your ambulance surgeons! What could beat that?" gurgled the delighted Jerry.

"You are sure?" urged the man, looking brighter at the same time.

"Just as sure as I know my own name. But you need attention which you can hardly get here. We ought to move you over to our camp, where I can give you my personal care."

Will was evidently proud of having come upon his first patient. It aroused the zeal that had of late been slumbering a little under the new impetus of his later love for photography.

The man on the bed of hemlock boughs smiled rather grimly, Frank thought, as he said:

"You are very kind, my boy, and generous, in the bargain. I believe, myself, that I shall need more or less care for some time, but I'm apt to get it in another quarter than in your camp. There is a gentleman who is waiting to administer to my needs with the best doctors that the State supplies."

Frank saw him look meaningfully past them, and turning, he was not very much surprised to see Mr. Dodd, the sheriff, standing quietly just inside the entrance to the cave.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PROOF OF THE NEGATIVE

"COME in, Mr. Sheriff. Don't be bashful," said Thaddeus Lasher, with a grimace of pain.

"Thank you, Lasher. Glad to see you so cheerful." And Mr. Dodd walked in.

"Oh, I've become reconciled to my fate, that's all. This boy has relieved my fear that I had a broken leg; and just now, of all times, that would have been a sure-enough calamity. He's eased the pain some, too, which is another blessing," returned the escaped convict.

The sheriff looked keenly at him.

"I admire your grit, anyway, and I'm sorry that duty compels me to disturb your dream of freedom," he observed.

"That's all right, Mr. Sheriff. I'm not asking favors of any man—*now!*" replied the other.

Frank was amazed. He thought that if ever a poor fellow had cause for mourning his hard luck, Thaddeus Lasher was the one. He had escaped from prison, and eluded the authorities for

nearly three months, only to have this miserable fall, that in a measure was responsible for his being retaken.

And yet he even smiled, back of the lines of physical pain on his face.

Another man stood in the entrance to the grotto, one of Mr. Dodd's deputies; in fact, the same fellow who had spent the night in camp with the boys.

"What can we do about it, Bill?" questioned the sheriff.

At this the man came forward and bent over the recumbent form.

"Sure he ain't shamming, are you, Mr. Dodd?" he asked dubiously.

"How about it, Will?" And the sheriff turned with a smile to the amateur surgeon.

"No sham there, sir. He really thought he had broken the bones, but it proves to be a sprain that will keep him from walking alone for weeks. I was just making a suggestion when you came."

"And what might that be, my boy?" queried the sheriff kindly.

"If he could be carried to our big canoe, we would engage to paddle him across the lake to our camp. There I would be able to take charge of him until such time as you thought best to—er—leave us," stammered Will.

At that the sheriff grinned and the wounded man laughed outright.

"Don't hesitate to say it, my boy," said the latter, "because I know, of course, that the officer is here for one purpose, and that is to take me back to the prison I escaped from with a particular purpose in view. Isn't that so, sheriff?"

"Sorry to say it is," replied Mr. Dodd, shaking his head.

"But he's mistaken when he thinks that they are going to add to my four years because of this break of mine. I tell you that rather will I have this State on its knees, apologizing to me as best it can for having kept me shut up all this time without cause!" exclaimed the man, raising himself on his elbow, and speaking with a passion that thrilled the boys.

Again Mr. Dodd surveyed his prisoner with renewed interest.

"That sounds like you had found something, Thaddeus," he remarked, a bit eagerly, for the strange case had interested him much more than it did the stubborn head warden of the penitentiary.

"Well, I have!" replied the convict, with a ring of triumph in his voice.

"The booty?" demanded the officer.

"Yes; but, best of all, the glass negative that

Fletcher somehow refused to destroy, even though it would incriminate him, if ever seen!"

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Will, in great excitement, for this point of the matter appealed to him as nothing else could.

The sheriff showed his good heart by bending down and grasping the hand of the prostrate convict.

"I congratulate you, Thaddeus. I liked your nerve in breaking away to prove the claim you made. So the old thief didn't fool you, after all? Well, it goes to his credit as one decent thing he did in his life, perhaps the only one, at that. Now, I think the lad's suggestion a good one. We must get you out of here, and the sooner the better. Bill, bear a hand with me," he said, with a business-like air.

"Hold on, just a minute, Mr. Sheriff! Of course, you understand that I've got all that plunder secreted away. When I can get back here again I'll lead the officers to where it lies, and I don't believe he ever touched a single thing of the lot, for he was caught soon afterward on another old charge and sent up, to end his days behind the bars. But I must hold on to that plate, for if all goes well, it means liberty and life to me, thank God!"

He spoke a few words to Andy, who hurried off

to a corner of the cavern. Bending down, he took a package from a crevice, handling it very carefully. It was wrapped in an old newspaper, and outside of that a flannel shirt had been tied. That photographic, fragile bit of glass was worth more to poor Thaddeus Lasher than all the wealth of the Indies.

"Now do with me what you please, Mr. Sheriff," said the man grimly.

They handled him as carefully as possible, though in spite of their solicitude he groaned several times as he was being carried down the slope to where the three canoes were drawn up on the pebbly strand.

Making as good a cushion as possible in the bottom of the large canoe, the boys assisted in laying the wounded man there. He heaved a sigh of relief when this was finally accomplished.

"It's mighty Christian-like of you young chaps to help a wretched fugitive from justice in this way; but make up your minds, boys, you're only assisting an unfortunate fellow to right himself in the eyes of the world," he said, with a grateful look toward Frank and his chums.

"How about that ghost racket, sir?" asked Bluff, unable to restrain his curiosity longer.

"That answered its purpose for some time while I was hunting; but it seems as though it must

have outlived its usefulness. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if it was the main cause of this invasion of my private territory," said Lasher humorously, evidently glad of a chance to have his mind diverted from his suffering.

"Well, it was really the cause of our coming up here. Only for the ghost of Oak Ridge we might have selected another place for camping. Some time I'd like to know how you did it, though Frank said that shiny appearance could be caused by using phosphorus," persisted Bluff.

"Which was just what I did," acknowledged the other, as the canoe was shoved off, with Frank in the stern and Jerry seated in the bow, paddles in hand, ready to make the passage of Lake Surprise.

Mr. Dodd was stowed away in the canoe with Will, while Bluff ferried Bill across with the greatest ease. So in good time they landed on the other shore. Here, Adolphus and Jed awaited them, with wonder on their faces. When the colored man heard that the boys were bringing the dreadful "ghost" to camp his knees shook with fear; and all the time Thaddeus Lasher remained in that place the negro refused to go near him, such was his superstition.

They soon made the wounded man fairly comfortable.

"To-morrow," said the sheriff, later on, "if so be you can let us have your team, we will take Thaddeus to town, and send the wagon back by one of my men."

"It's a bargain, Mr. Dodd. That will give us one more night, then, of your society, which pleases my chums and myself. Watch Will! I can suspect what he's hanging around the wounded man for," remarked Frank.

"That negative draws him," suggested the other, laughing.

"That's what it is. Just at present he's photography mad, as you might say. He tries to snap us off in the most astonishing situations. I believe that if I happened to be hanging by my toes, from a limb fifty feet from the ground, and in danger of having my brains dashed out, Will would shriek out to me to 'Please, *please*, can't you just wait a few seconds till I get you focussed!' "

The sheriff laughed heartily.

"There! He's speaking to Thaddeus now. The man looks interested and anxious. He hardly knows whether to allow his precious plate to pass out of his hands, even for a few minutes," he remarked presently.

"But he has decided to take the risk. There! He hands the package to my chum. Note that

look of rapture on Will's face, please! Nothing could delight Will more than a chance to undertake that little printing job. Now he has gone into the tent, and I suppose that before long we'll know what's what," said Frank.

"It'll be an anxious ten minutes to poor Thaddeus," remarked the sheriff.

Presently Will came out with a printing frame, which he stuck where the bright sun could fall full upon it.

"He's going to just try a solio print at first," remarked Frank. "It will do to prove the thing, one way or the other. Later on he can print all the permanent copies the man wants."

Twice did Andy approach Will with a message from his father, but the young photographer only shook his head. Finally he snatched up the frame, took a look, by unfastening one end, and then eagerly removed the paper.

The wounded man, who was lying near the fire, drew himself up on his elbow, and the look on his face was full of eagerness.

"What luck?" asked Frank, hurrying over.

"The best ever! The print is as clear as a bell, and I'll get a fine picture when I go at it properly. See there!"

Will held out the paper, upon which the sun had printed a positive reproduction of the inte-

rior of a room, with a man crouching before a safe. His head was turned as though he had been looking straight at the concealed camera, so that his face stood out clear and distinct!

It was a smooth-shaven, repulsive face, but utterly unlike that of Thaddeus Lasher!

CHAPTER XXV

CONCLUSION

THE sheriff took one look.

"Let me have it, boy. That man is dying to see, and I warrant you he would rather gaze on this picture than on a stack of gold eagles ten feet high. It spells liberty to him!"

With that he hastened over and handed the print to the convict. One look Thaddeus gave, and then they saw his lips move, though no sound came forth. Perhaps he was giving thanks for the strange mercy that had been shown him.

"All of which goes to show that a good deed brings its reward. When Thaddeus held out a helping hand to that poor sick chap in the prison, and did some small thing to help him, he little suspected what his reward was going to be. But Fletcher must have learned why his friend was behind the bars, and in the end his only thought was to undo the wrong as much as possible," the sheriff said.

The man nodded, as he eagerly added:

"You have hit it right, sheriff; that was just what happened. I knew he told the truth, and when they refused to let me make a search I determined to risk everything to prove my claim; and to think that now I shall go free! Not only that, but my name will be cleared, and my family can hold up their heads again!"

"It's too bad that the State can't make some recompense for these years you have spent in prison, an innocent man; but you know that's impossible," said Mr. Dodd.

"Yes, I know it; but after all, it served me right, because I was leading a wild life just about that time, and all through drink. Never more for me! I've seen a light. When I get that big reward promised by the owner of that stolen collection I'm going to take care of my poor family. Andy, here, deserves an education and a chance in life. He wants to be a chauffeur, he says, and I'll see that he gets a place. But words can never tell you, boys, how much I'm indebted to you for all you've done for me!"

The four chums were visibly affected by his emotion, but Jerry started some of his pranks in order to hide his feelings, and soon the whole company were in a cheerful mood.

When night came the boys had another fine

fish spread, for Frank, with Jerry had been tempted to make a second expedition out on the lake, and the bass took the gaudy artificial lure quite as eagerly as on the former occasion. They brought in a dozen fine husky fellows, each of which had given them the time of their lives while the excitement lasted.

There did not seem to be a single member of the little company who could not join heartily in the pleasure of the evening. Thaddeus was feeling much easier, and the prospect of his early vindication and freedom went far toward making him forget all the tortures he had endured while an innocent victim to circumstantial evidence.

So they laughed and sang, after which the sheriff told many remarkable stories connected with his experiences as an officer of the law.

"I'll never forget this camping trip, boys," he said. "Eh, Bill?"

"The time of my life," declared that worthy, who was a man of few words.

"And we've certainly had the time of ours," declared Frank, "in saying which I know I voice the sentiments of my chums."

"Hear! hear!" came from Bluff, as he waved his hat.

"We'll be sorry to see you go, Mr. Dodd," declared Will; "and before that event casts a wet

blanket on our spirits, remember that you must pose for me with all the fellows around you, and Mr. Lasher, in the bargain."

"Thank you, my boy! That's the first breath of freedom! With heaven's help, I shall soon be Mr. Lasher again, and not No. 772," said the wounded man gladly.

"And boys, I feel sure that no matter where we may roam, or what queer things may fall to our lot, we never can enjoy an outing one-half so well as we have this little trip, started with the intention of running down the story of the ghost of Oak Ridge. I'm sure every one of you will agree with me on that."

Although they unanimously voted that what Frank said was the truth, like others of us who cannot lift the veil of the future, the four chums were mistaken, for although they did not dream of it just then, it was written that ere six months had passed they would again be starting out on an expedition with a scope much broader than anything that had as yet dawned upon their experience.

What remarkable happenings befell them under Southern skies, and how they proved themselves, as always, ready to meet and conquer difficulties, will be set before the readers of these stories in a new volume, to be entitled "The Outdoor

Chums on the Gulf; or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists."

When morning came, after a hearty breakfast preparations were made looking to the return of the sheriff and his posse, together with Andy and his father.

Will had made several fine, clear prints of the scene in the collector's library, which the flashlight had revealed so cleverly, and armed with these, Thaddeus Lasher had no fear of the future. He knew that peace and prosperity had finally marked him for a favorite, after his life's bark had been tossed about on tempestuous seas so long.

Of course, Will kept a copy for his collection. He also secured several views of the camp, with the party ready to start. These would give him and his chums much pleasure during their winter meetings, when the events of past outings were being discussed.

So the wagon went away. To dispose of the remarkable event, it might be just as well to say right here that Thaddeus Lasher was speedily released from prison on the strength of that incriminating picture which showed Fletcher, easily recognized, in the act of looting the collector's safe.

Mr. Lasher, later on, led the same eager collector to the spot where the booty had been hid-

den by the thief, and the whole of it was recovered. The directions given by the dying Fletcher had been somewhat vague, which accounted for Thaddeus having to cover so much ground before he eventually ran across the *cache*.

The reward was readily handed over to him. It amounted to ten thousand dollars, for the collection was valued at much more than its actual cost by the wealthy man who pursued this fad. Mr. Lasher bought a small cottage near Center-ville, and with his wife and three children settled down to real happiness.

Perhaps, after all, his experience, while rough, had been the means of saving him from ruin, for he had been on the downward road at the time of his arrest. He was never heard to complain of the past.

After the departure of the team the boys set about enjoying themselves after their various ideas of pleasure. Horses could not drag Will far away from that blessed camera of his, and he was forever experimenting with new pictures.

"I tell you, fellows, I'm going to have the dandiest lot for our album you ever saw," he declared when they took him to task for not entering into the water sports with more fervor.

"Yes, and I give you my word I know the one

that will hold the chief place in that same album," remarked Jerry sarcastically.

"Which might that be?" asked Will calmly.

"The one which Bluff took of you sticking in that quicksand, with good old Peter hitched to a rope, ready to yank you out."

"Oh, well, I did think of giving that one a place alongside the picture of you being chased around that tree by those ferocious wild dogs. I've considered that the prize of the entire collection heretofore," remarked Will smoothly.

Then the laugh was on Jerry, for he did not like to recall that fierce episode, related in the first volume of this series.

"All right; but I got the whole bunch of them in the end, you'll remember," he said defiantly.

"So you did, Jerry, and nobody could have done finer," remarked Frank, throwing cooling water on the little flames.

On the following day the team came back, and they kept the deputy over night. He reported that the wounded man had stood the rough journey better than was anticipated, and that the doctor had openly commended the treatment which the young camp physician had commenced. He said that but for the prompt relief afforded, the condition of the sufferer must have been much worse.

Of course, much patting on the back for Will followed the receipt of this intelligence.

"Oh, I always knew the fellow had it in him to be a boss doctor, if only he would let this tiresome photography alone for a spell," quoth Bluff.

"Somebody has to fix these wonderful stunts you fellows do, so that posterity may enjoy them, and I choose to be the one, that's all," remarked Will.

Their vacation was now half over. They laid plans for the balance of the days they expected to spend at Lake Surprise. The little sheet of water in the mountains was so charming that none of them dreamed of making another change of base. Indeed, they knew they would leave the spot with many regrets, and that in memory they must often look back to that delightful camp, and sigh to think it was no more.

And so the last day finally came, when they had to pack up for the return journey. No one showed any enthusiasm about the job.

Some of them expected to go away from Centerville for a few weeks at the seashore with parents, or other relatives; but the prospect had little charm for them at that hour.

"I'd rather, by long odds, stay right here until school opens up in the fall," declared Bluff mournfully, as he turned to take a last look at the pretty

silvery lake ere they passed the bend that would shut off the entrancing view.

However, as they drew further away they managed to recover from their depression, and it was not long before Bluff and Jerry were pursuing an animated dispute as to which of them had come out victor in the many contests with those air mattresses.

Will and Frank could keep the secret no longer. When, amid bursts of laughter, they told of the compact by means of which the rivals were to be coaxed into a competition whereby the job of blowing up those big air cushions every night would be taken off their shoulders, the two victims looked somewhat sheepish at first, but presently joined in the merriment at their expense.

Lucky is the boy who can take a joke, even when he is the victim.

"Anyhow, I believe my chest is an inch bigger because of the exercise," declared Bluff stoutly.

"I don't believe you got as much benefit out of it as I did, for since I was the winner I must have shown larger lungs than you did," said Jerry.

Then the heated discussion was on again, leading Frank to say:

"Boys, keep all that until we go out again, when you can open up another heat, and settle the matter for good. Will and I agree to umpire the race

without the least leaning toward either contestant, won't we, Will?"

The outdoor chums reached home that evening, and the farmer's bound boy went with them.

"Jed, I want you to come with me," said Frank.

"What for?" asked the lad.

"I want you to have a talk with Bluff's father. He is a lawyer and may be able to do something for you."

"All right," was the prompt reply.

When they got to Bluff's home they had to wait for some time, for the lawyer was busy with one of his clients. But at last Bluff's father had a chance to listen to what Jed had to tell.

"Show me those marks on your body," said the lawyer, and when the farmer's boy did as requested Mr. Masters looked exceedingly stern.

"I shall certainly take this matter up for you," he said. "It is an outrage."

"Do you think Jed ought to go back to his cruel uncle?" asked Frank.

"Never," cried the lawyer firmly. "Such a man is not fit to have anybody live with him."

A little later Frank took Jed to Jerry's home, and there asked to see the banker.

"What is it?" questioned Mr. Wallington, with interest.

"We want your advice about something, Mr.

Wallington," answered Frank. "This boy has found a paper I think valuable."

"Where was this found?" asked the banker, as he took the slip, and Frank and Jed told about the locket and how the paper has been brought to light.

"The Consolidated Heckla, eh?" mused the banker. "That is quite a well-known mining property, but whether the stock is up or down just now I cannot say."

"Can you find out?" asked Jerry, who was present.

"Oh, yes, I'll make it my business to find out to-morrow," answered his parent.

"And when will you let me know?" asked Jed eagerly.

"Come to my office at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon."

It may well be imagined that the poor lad could hardly wait for the time to pass. He stayed at Frank's home most of the day, but three o'clock found him at the banker's office, in company with Frank and the other boys.

"Well, I have looked up the Consolidated Heckla," said the banker with a smile.

"And what of it?" asked Frank. "Oh, please don't keep Jed and me waiting, Mr. Wallington."

"Well, I find that Heckla has made a splendid

strike lately, consequently the shares owned by the late father of this lad are quite valuable."

"Good!" shouted Frank, and all the other boys echoed his sentiment.

"As much as a—a thousand dollars?" faltered Jed.

"As much as a good many thousand dollars, Jed," answered the banker.

"Oh, dear me! I must be dreaming!" murmured the lad, and then the tears of joy commenced to course down his cheeks. His days of want and cruelty were at an end.

"It's like a dream," he whispered to Frank. "I'm almost afraid I'll wake up and find it ain't true!"

"But it is true, Jed, every word of it!" cried Frank.

"If you wish me to do so, I will see what I can do with the stock," pursued the banker.

"All right," said Jed, readily, for he now felt he was in the hands of real friends.

"And I will act with Mr. Masters against your uncle," added Mr. Wallington.

"He ought to be punished," was Will's comment.

"I'd like to ride him on a rail," said Frank.

"Or tar and feather him," added Bluff.

"That sort of talk won't do," said the banker.

"You will have to let the law take its course."

"Well, get all you can out of the mining stock," said Frank.

"I'll surely do that," answered the banker.

Eventually the shares were sold for a large sum, and this invested so that the income would support Jed until he came of age, when the principal would be his own, to do with as he pleased.

No one ever found out just how Farmer Dobson learned that the paper was contained in the locket. He knew enough to keep his own counsel in the matter. The court reprimanded him for his cruel treatment of his charge and took the boy away, placing him in a comfortable home, where he found a mother's love in the good woman of the house.

And so it seemed that the expedition formed on the spur of the moment, with the idea of discovering the truth about that ghost of Oak Ridge, was productive of much good to several persons who were in serious trouble, as well as affording great enjoyment to the four chums who took part in the outing on Lake Surprise.

"It was a great outing, eh, fellows?" said Will.

"The best ever!" cried Bluff. "You can't beat it anywhere!"

"May we have many more like it," came from Frank.

“So say we all of us!” cried the Outdoor Chums in concert.

And here let us take our leave and say good-by.

THE END

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